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**DR NAMRATA GOSWAMI**  
**China and the Quest for Influence**



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## DR NAMRATA GOSWAMI

### CHINA AND THE QUEST FOR INFLUENCE IN THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

In his two-hour speech to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), President Xi Jinping not only solidified for himself a unique third five-year term as General Secretary of the CPC, [1] Chairman of the Central Military Commission and President of the People’s Republic of China, but also asserted China’s focus on national rejuvenation and civilizational greatness. Xi stated and I quote:

*We have developed well-conceived and complete strategic plans for advancing the cause of the Party and the country in the new era. We have put forward the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and proposed promoting national rejuvenation through a Chinese path to modernization. We have made well-coordinated efforts to advance our great struggle, our great project, our great cause, and our great dream. [2]*

This Xi stated would be accomplished through the leadership of the CPC as supreme guide of China’s great future and by focusing on developing key strategic technologies like Artificial Intelligence, Space, Robotics and Quantum computing. For Xi, the purpose of China’s development was clear; to increase its influence in the international order and to shape that order in a manner beneficial to China so that it can develop norms, rules of the road and strategic technologies that sustain this ‘party meritocracy’ (read authoritarian politics) as the CPC puts it.



Dr Namrata Goswami

Words like China is a democracy (party democracy) were thrown into the official English translation of President Xi Jinping's speech, with China knowing full well that this challenges the Western concept of representative electoral democracy as the only legitimate democratic political model out there.

Great Powers care about international order. At the level of international order, what matters is how a country can utilize its economic power to persuade other states that are not Great Powers, but major or middle powers to align with its agendas and interests. To accomplish this, Great Powers utilize a combination of factors, to include economic largess (offering loans, gifts, infrastructure development) to countries that need it in return for support to their leadership in the international system, through military power projection, through demonstration of technologies and an ability to draw global talent through innovative domestic policies and an open trading system. Space technologies play a critical role in showcasing those futuristic capabilities and establish a nation's greatness. Consequently, in his speech, Xi highlighted China's need to demonstrate spacepower, through its Moon and Mars missions, satellite internet, and deep space exploration.[3] This was drastically different in ambition and scope from the recently released U.S. national security strategy in which space was not identified as a core priority area, and the strategic conversation on space in a single paragraph was about space traffic management, and space governance and there was zero mention of U.S. grand ambitions in space. The arms control discourse limited to Earth orbital ambitions still had center stage in U.S. space policy.[4]

Given the context of Xi's speech and assumption of power for a third consecutive term, here are some of the factors that China is focused on to demonstrate its Great Power status in the 21st century: -

### Soft Power

Millions tuned in, to watch the CPC and the 20th Party Congress and Xi's speech. This itself showcased China's soft power; that the international order cared about what China is aiming for, what its strategic priorities are, and what is the message the CPC is sending to the world and to its domestic audience. Concepts like China as a responsible power, Covid zero, contribution to climate progress, peaceful power and with growing influence, economic development, a little soul churning as to the limits of growth, all make China an attractive alternative to the West, for a diverse international audience. Words like China is a democracy (party democracy) were thrown into the official English translation of President Xi Jinping's speech, with China knowing full well that this challenges the Western concept of representative electoral democracy as the only legitimate democratic political model out there.

China cares about its international image because there is an international audience that cares about what China is saying and doing and hence its soft power is on the rise.

### The Issue of Taiwan and Assertion of Great Power

Asia especially East Asia is projected as China's strategic neighborhood with Taiwan as the key core territory of China, no matter what the Taiwanese want or support. Xi asserted that it's the 'One China Principle', "a core belief stating that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China with the PRC serving as the sole legitimate government of that China." [5] Xi asserted that China will respond to any move Taiwan would make towards independence, including with the use of military force if needed. Towards this end, China has been steadily building its military capacity to include its navy, missile deployment and space support infrastructure as well as counter space weapons to deter and destroy U.S. space-based military Command and Control structures. Recently, Chinese military writings have included Starlink, the satellite constellation put up by SpaceX as an adversary military force multiplier that must be destroyed if a future conflict erupts over Taiwan between the U.S. and China. [6]

### China-Russia

The strategic partnership between China and Russia is viewed by China under Xi Jinping's leadership as a key cornerstone of China's great power status, by extension meaning a major power like Russia joining in and supporting Chinese leadership adds legitimacy to China.[7] This partnership has not changed despite Russia's military operation in Ukraine. China views Russia as having legitimate concerns in Ukraine to include a growing NATO and U.S. influence in the region which China views as detrimental to its assertion of Great Power status in that region. This support for Russia is visible at the United Nations where China abstained at the United Nations Security Council on a resolution brought about by the U.S. deploring the Russian military actions in Ukraine. China voted against a resolution at the United Nations General Assembly suspending Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council. The more complicated the international order is, with states outside of the West refusing to condemn Russia, the more strategic clarity China gets for what international support would be there for any future Chinese intervention in Taiwan.



### China and the Global South

China views itself as part of the 'global South' and legitimizes its Great Power status as part of the Asian century argument and the 'West versus the rest,' narrative whereas Western hegemony of ideas, institutions, education, trade, military power are showcased as having a negative influence on the world.[8] The need for alternative international relations theory, non-Western international relations, institutions and trading blocs is something China champions as part of that narrative. The fact that Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, Philippines, India views China's growing assertion of its power as detrimental to their sense of security is brushed aside as irrelevant.

### Hard Power

Chinese foreign policy and great power status have a realist orientation with culture put into that grand narrative. Assertions of civilizational wisdom never fails to make it to CPC leaders' speeches, of course, directed by Marxism with Chinese characteristics. In this major narrative, hard power, to include possession of nuclear weapons, military conventional power, space power, cyber power, and a focus on developing key strategic technologies of the future like enhanced AI, robotics, space presence on the Moon and Mars, and dominating the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) are part of the Chinese grand strategic narrative. An ability to sustain Chinese presence far from the mainland, say in outer space or bases in Africa has become part of China's military doctrine. Taking the strategic initiative to assert its Great Power status, by economic and military projection of power (land, air, sea, space, cyber) has become part of core ideological and military doctrinal focus under Xi's leadership.

### Challenge U.S. Leadership

In the Chinese worldview, the U.S. leadership in the international order is not legitimate. Specifically, the U.S. has no business in maintaining a presence in China's strategic neighborhood especially East Asia with military presence in Japan, South Korea, Diego Garcia, Guam. This was possible as per the Chinese narrative because China was weak after 1945. A return to great power glory (a tributary system of sorts) will correct this historical humiliation.

Photo credit courtesy Xinhua.

The international order of the 21st century will be determined by that nation that expresses and establishes a long-term plan driven by purpose, strategic confidence and clarity. China aspires to fulfil that role by offering long term plans for the global economy, outer space and strategic technologies, Whether China will achieve these goals will depend on its ability to meet these aspirations, the resilience of its internal political system, and the buy in by other states in the international system led by Chinese leadership. The race for international influence is on.

The more power China accumulates, the less the U.S. will have the ability to respond to China reshaping its strategic neighborhood and the Asian regional order. This Chinese perspective was validated after a lackluster U.S. response to China reshaping the South China Sea islands and declaring an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Seas. Hard Chinese power worked to limit the U.S. capacity to respond with the U.S. restricted to symbolic U.S based academic and policy discourses on how China needs to be shamed into following the rules of international order and norms of behavior, and how China should be punished internationally through such words of shaming. The Chinese counter arguments were classic and effective: whose norms and whose rules of behavior are we talking about. Western hegemony and a self-styled righteousness of assuming universal norms which are mostly Western in spirit, origin and dissemination. We may not like these Chinese counter arguments for their clever strategic duplicity but that is the Chinese strategic play we need to acquaint ourselves with.

The international order of the 21st century will be determined by that nation that expresses and establishes a long-term plan driven by purpose, strategic confidence and clarity. China aspires to fulfil that role by offering long term plans for the global economy, outer space and strategic technologies, Whether China will achieve these goals will depend on its ability to meet these aspirations, the resilience of its internal political system, and the buy in by other states in the international system led by Chinese leadership. The race for international influence is on.

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Image courtesy: bne IntelliNews.

Fr Ivo Coelho is a Catholic priest belonging to the Salesian Society of Don Bosco. He was born in Mumbai in 1958 and did his early schooling in Mumbai and Lonavla. He studied under the Indologist Richard De Smet at Jnana Deepa, Pune, and later specialized in the hermeneutical thought of the Canadian philosopher, theologian and economist Bernard Lonergan, earning a PhD in philosophy at the Gregorian University, Rome, for his work on "The Development of the Notion of the Universal Viewpoint in Bernard Lonergan: *From Insight to Method in Theology*" (1994). He has been principal of Divyadaan: Salesian Institute of Philosophy (1988-90) and Reader in Gnoseology and Metaphysics. He was also Rector at Divyadaan (1994-2002), secretary of the Association of Christian Philosophers of India (2000-02), and provincial of the Mumbai province of the Salesians of Don Bosco (2002-08). Since 2014 he is based in Rome where he is in charge of the training and formation sector of the Salesians of Don Bosco. He is the author of *Hermeneutics and Method: The 'Universal Viewpoint' in Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto, 2001), and a number of articles. He has also been editing the writings of Richard De Smet (1916-1997), with the following having been published so far: *Brahman and Person: Essays by Richard De Smet* (Delhi 2010); *Understanding Sankara: Essays by Richard De Smet* (Delhi 2013); and *Richard De Smet, Guidelines in Indian Philosophy* (Delhi 2022). Till 2019 he was editor of *Divyadaan: Journal of Philosophy and Education*.

## DR (FATHER) IVO COELHO

### FRATERNITY AND TIME

"Hatred is pure excitement, but fraternity involves time, even the time of boredom." This was one of the many comments on Pope Francis' extraordinary letter *Fratelli Tutti* (FT) on fraternity and social friendship.

Meditations on human fraternity are not, of course, new. What is remarkable is that they are coming from someone who is the head of the Catholic Church, in an effort to reach out to people of all religions and of no religion at all.

A statement on fraternity was needed. Believers run the temptation of thinking that the brother and the sister one is called to love and care for are the ones who belong to our club, our faith, or the visible boundaries of one's religion. In his letter, Pope Francis blasts open this caricature of Christianity. In doing so he upholds the full consequence of the 'Our Father' that Christians recite every day and even several times a day: if God is our Father, we are all brothers and sisters, members of one family. *Fratelli Tutti* affirms this perspective in unambiguous terms: we are brothers and sisters, all of us, across the globe, and we are all of us called to be friends. The question, therefore, is not "Who is my brother?" but rather "Whose brother can I be?"



Dr Ivo Coelho



Let me concentrate on something that I find new and exciting in these meditations of Pope Francis: the way he links the construction of fraternity with time.

But first a word on the strange expression, *social friendship*. Francis never defines the term, but I imagine that social friendship, like fraternity, is universal: it goes beyond one-to-one friendships to embrace everyone. “Our love for others, for who they *are*, moves us to seek the best for their lives. Only by cultivating this way of relating to one another will we make possible a social friendship that excludes no one and a fraternity that is open to all.” (FT 94)

Social friendship, Francis insists, is not the work of “professional and media resources” or of one part of society. The active agent of the culture of encounter is the people. (FT 216) And social peace is not achieved by recourse only to the pure and untainted, since “even people who can be considered questionable on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked”. (FT 217)

The important thing is to create processes of encounter. (FT 217) Time is greater than space. Francis is convinced that it is more important to begin processes than to dominate spaces.

One of the processes recommended by the pope is *dialogue*: “Let us arm our children with the weapons of dialogue! Let us teach them to fight the good fight of the culture of encounter!” (FT 217)

Dialogue is not merely an interpersonal affair. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), Francis distinguishes three types of dialogue: “For the Church today, three areas of dialogue stand out where she needs to be present in order to promote full human development and to pursue the common good: dialogue with states, dialogue with society – including dialogue with cultures and the sciences – and dialogue with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church.” (EG 238)

Whether interpersonal or social, dialogue always calls for patience, respect and a willingness to listen, rather than haste or judgment. “Authentic social dialogue involves the ability to respect the other’s point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns.” (FT 203)

Photograph <https://pixabay.com>

Thomas Aquinas had pointed out that human intellect progresses from potency to perfect act (perfect science from every viewpoint) through a series of incomplete acts, and philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan draws the consequence that the progress of human intellect “is to be predicated not of the individual but of humanity.” Gandhi would have felt very much at home with this.

Dialogue is intrinsically related, therefore, to time and to patience. “Reaching a level of maturity where individuals can make truly free and responsible decisions calls for much time and patience.” (EG 171)

We have to be ready to dialogue with everyone. Social peace is not achieved by recourse only to the pure and untainted, since “even people who can be considered questionable on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked.” (FT 217)

It is a romantic illusion to assume that fraternity overlooks the very real fissures, divisions, problems and hatreds that are part of human history. All these are very real, and it is precisely in this world that we are invited to believe in fraternity and regard everyone as brothers and sisters. The construction of fraternity does not happen without the asceticism of patience.

Interestingly, Francis offers also some considerations on consensus and truth that might seem contradictory but are in fact essential to the construction of fraternity and social friendship.

Authentic social dialogue involves the ability to respect the point of view of the other and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns. (FT 203) “Public discussion, if it truly makes room for everyone and does not manipulate or conceal information, is a constant stimulus to a better grasp of the truth, or at least its more effective expression.” Differences, Francis affirms, are creative: “they create tension and in the resolution of tension lies humanity’s progress.” (FT 203)

Francis is not, however, advocating relativism. “Under the guise of tolerance, relativism ultimately leaves the interpretation of moral values to those in power. Neither political efforts nor the force of law would be sufficient in the absence of objective truths and values.” (FT 206) One such objective truth is the sacredness, inviolability and dignity of every human being. (FT 207, 213)

The pope is convinced that “the human mind is capable of transcending immediate concerns and grasping certain truths that are unchanging” (FT 208), that it is possible “to arrive at certain fundamental truths always to be upheld” (FT 211), that there is “an enduring truth accessible to the intellect.” (FT 212) “Inherent in the nature of human beings and society there exist certain basic structures to support our development and survival.”

These can be discovered through dialogue, even though, strictly speaking, they are not created by consensus. “There is no need, then, to oppose the interests of society, consensus and the reality of objective truth. These three realities can be harmonized whenever, through dialogue, people are unafraid to get to the heart of an issue.” (FT 212)

If Francis can bat both for enduring truths and the way of dialogue, it is because it is possible to distinguish between truth as defined and the way to arrive at truth. With Francis, then, we can speak of enduring truths and of basic structures in the human being that are transcultural (asking questions, trying to understand, weighing evidence for judgments, and so on), and also about how we in fact arrive at truth (precisely through the exercise of the transcultural constants, through experiencing, understanding, judging...). One of the exercises of the transcultural constants is, in fact, dialogue.

Dialogue is consequent upon the fact that human beings are a species. Human social aggregations of one kind or another are, in fact, as primordial as the transcendental structures. There is a fundamental collaboration in knowing and in doing that is part of being human. That is why Francis can both affirm enduring truths and say that they can be discovered through dialogue, even though they are not created by consensus. That is why he can conclude: “There is no need, then, to oppose the interests of society, consensus and the reality of objective truth. These three realities can be harmonized whenever, through dialogue, people are unafraid to get to the heart of an issue.” (FT 212)

So we come back to a reaffirmation of the culture of encounter: “Life, for all its confrontations, is the art of encounter.” “I have frequently called for the growth of a culture of encounter capable of transcending our differences and divisions.” (FT 215)

Thomas Aquinas had pointed out that human intellect progresses from potency to perfect act (perfect science from every viewpoint) through a series of incomplete acts, and philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan draws the consequence that the progress of human intellect “is to be predicated not of the individual but of humanity.” Gandhi would have felt very much at home with this.

Universal fraternity is a fact, and it is also a task. Hatred is exciting, it sets the adrenalin flowing. Building fraternity, instead, takes time. It calls for kindness and for much patience. For time is greater than space. Francis encourages us to let go of our need to control spaces and to concentrate instead on initiating good processes. Dialogue is one such process, and it calls for much patience and even 'the time of boredom.' Convinced that we are all brothers and sisters, Francis invites all to join in his song to human fraternity.

The great apostle of non-violence held that we need to stand for the truth as we see it, but we also know that we do not possess the whole truth, and so the political (and personal) method that imposes itself is that of non-violent *satyagraha*, the holding-on-to-the-truth without hitting the other person on the head, even to the extent of being willing to suffer violence at that other person's hands, trusting that such willingness will eventually awaken the elements of humanity that lie, often obscured, in the depths of his or her being.

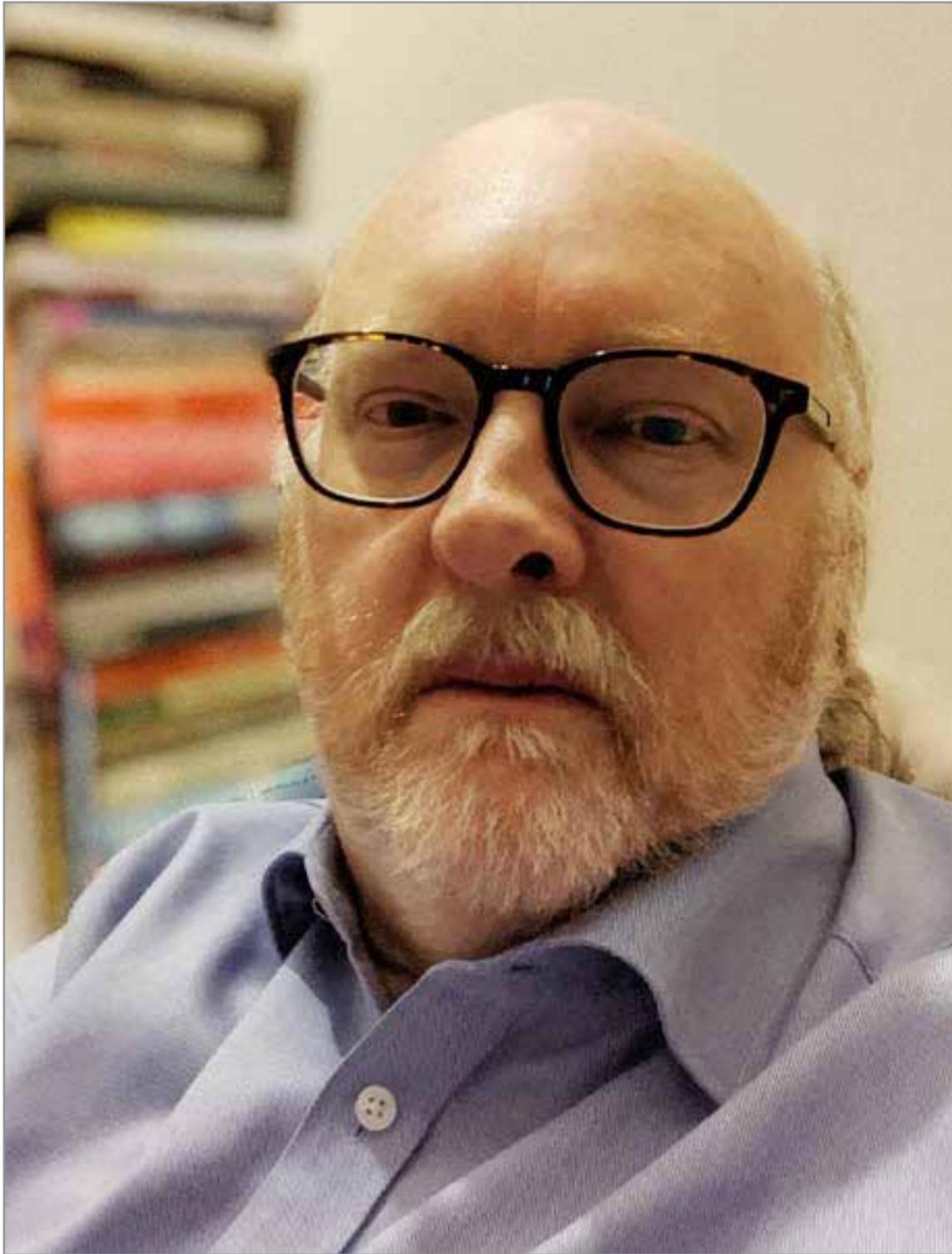
In the perspective of universal fraternity, the culture of encounter is inevitable, and, as Francis points out, differences are creative and enriching. (FT 203)

Universal fraternity is a fact, and it is also a task. Hatred is exciting, it sets the adrenalin flowing. Building fraternity, instead, takes time. It calls for kindness and for much patience. For time is greater than space. Francis encourages us to let go of our need to control spaces and to concentrate instead on initiating good processes. Dialogue is one such process, and it calls for much patience and even 'the time of boredom.' Convinced that we are all brothers and sisters, Francis invites all to join in his song to human fraternity.



Pope Francis kisses the hand of residential school survivor Alma Desjarlais of the Frog Lake First Nation during a welcoming ceremony at Edmonton International Airport July 24, 2022. The pope was beginning a six-day visit to Canada. CNS photo/Vatican Media

David Morgan is the author of *The Good Old Cause – Communist Intellectuals and the English Radical Tradition* and co-author of *Writers of the Left in An Age of Extremes*, both published in London by the Socialist History Society, of which he is the secretary. David is a journalist and editor who is interested in exploring the connections between literature and history.



## DAVID MORGAN

### TIME FOR PEACE - DESTROYING THE LEGENDS OF THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

The late British historian A J P Taylor several decades ago sought to destroy the “legends” surrounding the origins of the Second World War and argued that his approach should not be seen as in any way a “vindication” of Nazi Germany or of Adolf Hitler. “I have never seen any sense in the question of war guilt or war innocence,” Taylor argued, which was a bold and provocative position to adopt in the early sixties when he originally penned these words, less than two decades since the end of that most calamitous of wars.

“In a world of sovereign states, each does the best it can for its own interests; and can be criticised at most for mistakes, not for crimes”, Taylor further argued. He took destroying legends as part of the obligations of the historian: “It is a service to historical truth”, he said.

In his book, *The Origins of the Second World War*, Taylor judiciously sets out the various factors that led to the war’s outbreak. The book is still in print and still worth reading, especially at a time when we are embroiled in another protracted war again in mainland Europe, and whose end seems nowhere in sight more than eight months since the shooting started and the mobilisations began.

Of course, the roots of the Russia-Ukraine-Europe-NATO confrontation can be traced much further back in time than the outbreak of hostilities in February 2022. A case could be made for tracing its origins to the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s or even to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the onset of the Cold War. In many ways, the war is “unfinished business”.

But whatever its origins, we need to emulate the considered approach of the great historian if we are to fully grasp how we found ourselves mired in this latest European war and if we wish to find a means of extricating ourselves from the conflict before it all gets out of control.

David Morgan

It is not our war, that is, it is not a war in the interests of ordinary people; the leaders of the main Western powers in the European Union, the UK, NATO and the United States, have chosen deliberately to wage this war using Ukraine as a convenient proxy, to take on Russia and are now committed to fighting it for “as long as it takes”. They are jointly spending billions of dollars on it; the war budget is limitless. Our governments are prepared to push their citizens into poverty, destitution, homelessness, until the war ends in the nebulous “victory”.

Given the scale and sophistication of the technology of modern advanced weaponry it is a difficult task to confine modern warfare to a single restricted battlefield arena. Spillovers are inevitable. Civilians are targeted, innocent parties are dragged into it. Threats of nuclear annihilation should not be dismissed too lightly; the combatants are all playing for very high stakes.

With the very future of humanity at stake, all politicians have a duty to be absolutely honest with their public about their war aims especially if they expect people to make enormous sacrifices for the war effort. If we are expected to make these sacrifices, such as enduring cold and hunger, perhaps even losing our homes, we are entitled to understand why this is happening.

The war in Ukraine however is an unnecessary conflict and one that could have been avoided. It can and should be brought to an end as soon as humanly possible. Where are the international agencies, where are the intermediaries, where are the voices of reason? Whatever happened to our once mighty peace movements, who mobilised in their millions against the war in Iraq?

It is not our war, that is, it is not a war in the interests of ordinary people; the leaders of the main Western powers in the European Union, the UK, NATO and the United States, have chosen deliberately to wage this war using Ukraine as a convenient proxy, to take on Russia and are now committed to fighting it for “as long as it takes”. They are jointly spending billions of dollars on it; the war budget is limitless. Our governments are prepared to push their citizens into poverty, destitution, homelessness, until the war ends in the nebulous “victory”.

### Security Guarantees

Russia wants security guarantees, it seeks to halt the relentless onward march of NATO, a military alliance that was founded with the objective of containing Russia. All the rhetoric is about freedom and democracy, but the West’s war aims in Ukraine have never been clearly set out; yet it seems obvious that the objective is to weaken Russia, topple Putin and ultimately bring about a “regime change” in Moscow, in the expectation that a more pliant administration in the Kremlin is put in place; a weak and timorous Russia that will be favourable to the West, if not exactly one that is a client of Washington, as in the humiliation inflicted on the country during the Boris Yeltsin era as it emerged weakened in the wake of the Soviet collapse.



President Vladimir Zelensky with his wife Elena (seen above) posed for Vogue in staged back-drops. Conservative activist Scott Presler tweeted: ‘Why did we send \$54 billion to Ukraine, so Zelensky & his wife could pose for Vogue? You’re at war & you’ve got time for photo shoots?’

**Ironically, while the Western powers claim constantly to be standing up for freedom and democracy in backing Ukraine, our own domestic freedoms are being curtailed and our normal democratic processes eroded. The rigorous restrictions on the free media are like nothing we have experienced since the Second World War, when German nationals were rounded up, impounded and when pacifists were jailed.**

In weakening Russia once again, Washington and NATO would also be weakening China because of the alignments of the countries on the global stage. It is important to recognise that this war is largely a Western endeavour; much of Asia, the Middle East, China, India and Latin America, are not in favour of the war. These major countries do not support the punitive and swiftly imposed sanctions on Russia, the block on normal trading and the curtailing of oil and gas supplies; the latter being an all too obvious act of self-harm if ever there was one.

### **A Story Without Heroes and Villains**

In writing his book, A J P Taylor explained that he was “concerned to understand what happened, not to vindicate or condemn...in retrospect, though many were guilty, none was innocent...This is a story without heroes; and, perhaps even without villains.” These principles need to be applied by those commentating on the course of the war in Ukraine and the political complexion of a future Ukraine, which is currently engaging in a form of ethnic cleansing of all traces of Russian influence, despite the fact that the Ukrainian and Russian nations are historically entwined.

I want to argue, strongly and unambiguously, that we urgently need to take some of the heat out of the current situation. We need to conduct our debate more intelligently and rationally when outlining our arguments over the war in Ukraine and how we want to see it end. Inevitably, it will take time for the Russian and Ukrainian neighbours to live together amicably after all that has gone on, but they are connected by geography if nothing else at present and they will be forced to live and work together in the future. That conclusion is undeniable, even by the most diehard Russophobe, of which there are sadly far too many.

We do not really even know all the real reasons why we are fighting, or why the war is being allowed to drag on for so long. Some of us are shocked that there is so little discussion on the war taking place in the public domain, even in serious outlets, there is so little attention given to or focus on how the war might end, no real efforts are undertaken to broker a peace deal when a just peace is so desperately needed.

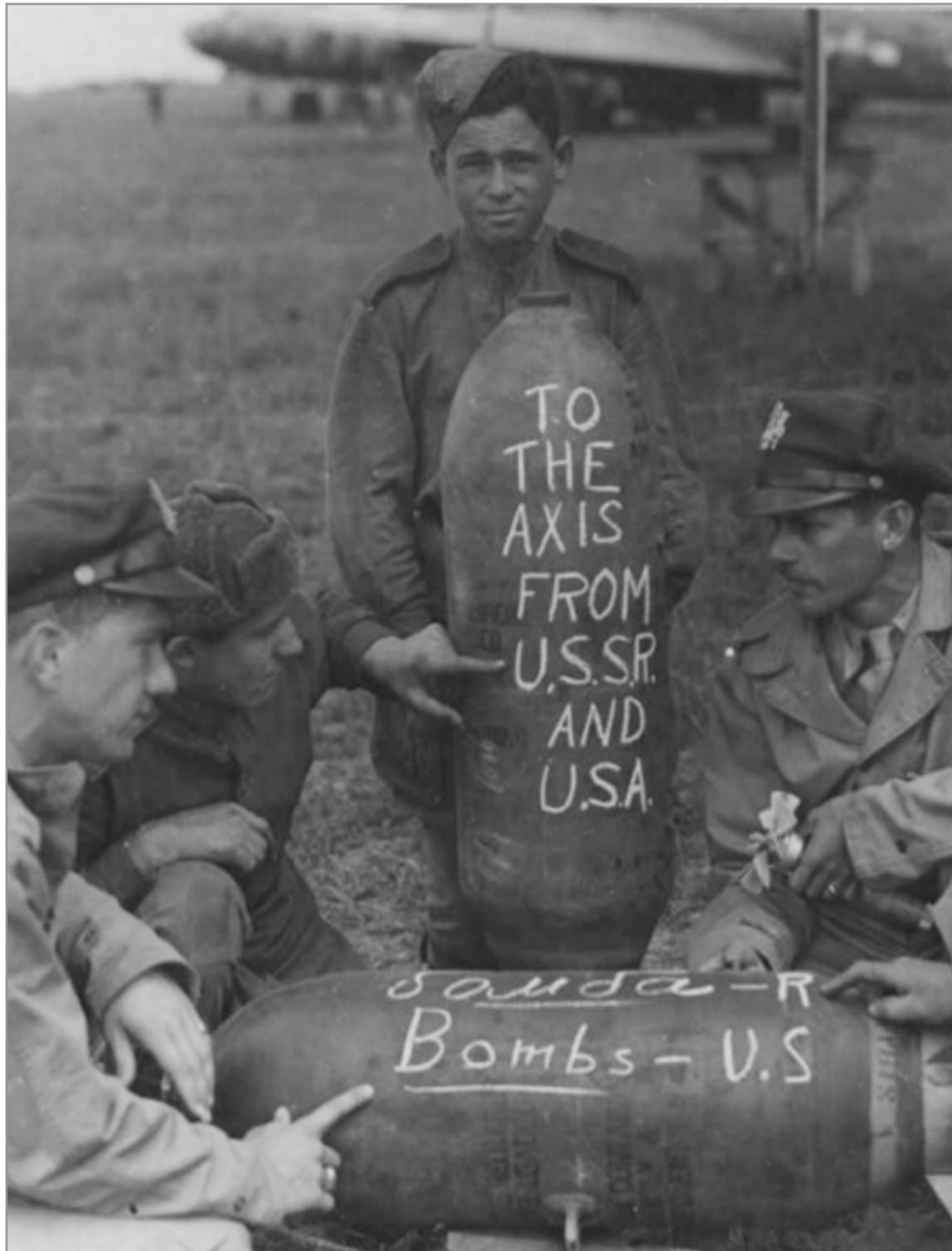
### **Forbidding Peace**

Even talk of peace seems to have been forbidden. Voices for peace have remained silent, or have been silenced, which amounts to virtually the same thing. Consequently, there is no peace movement of any significance; its activities are minimal and are carried out almost grudgingly as if mere gestures; the public statements made by peace groups are muted and at best ambiguous, as if they don't wish to offend anyone or to be judged to be “siding with the enemy”. There is a real war fever in the air which is instilling a fear that is clouding the atmosphere and imposing constraints on our very thoughts and opinions.

Ironically, while the Western powers claim constantly to be standing up for freedom and democracy in backing Ukraine, our own domestic freedoms are being curtailed and our normal democratic processes eroded. The rigorous restrictions on the free media are like nothing we have experienced since the Second World War, when German nationals were rounded up, impounded and when pacifists were jailed.

Popular attitudes to the war are inevitably shaped in large part by the information that is available to people, how it is presented to them, how it is assessed and read, just like with any other news story. The message from the mainstream media has been unvarying since the start of the war in February: We must back Ukraine at all costs, we must support the Ukrainian people; we must win this war. This message is repeated over and over again, with little variation, although as the war has progressed political leaders are more candid about their wish to “defeat Russia”, rather than simply forcing its troops to withdraw or teach it a lesson in how to conduct itself.

Every utterance from Kiev must be respected and believed; every news bulletin repeats the latest speech from President Zelensky and his cohorts; their latest accusations against Russia are believed without question, their claims are taken as fact and always go unchallenged, no matter how lurid and extreme the language that is used.



We are taught to respect the “other”, we are instructed to treat each other with the utmost respect, as we rightly should. But when it comes to Russia and Russian people these edicts and fine obligations are cast aside and do not apply. There is an ugly free for all. It is as if all our pent up rage and frustrations caused by having to bite our tongues incessantly in all other situations are being released for once over the war in Ukraine. The debate is toxic.

### Crass Parallels

We have been told that Russia is like Nazi Germany or worse than the Nazis; we have been asked to equate Putin with Hitler. It seems clear that those making these careless comments fail to consider the vital role of the Russians in defeating Hitler with their twenty million dead or how offensive it is to Russian sensibilities to draw such crass parallels. Such comments are really an attempt to rewrite history, as are the systematic removal of war memorials across Eastern Europe and their replacement with monuments to ultra-nationalist heroes such as Stepan Bandera in Ukraine; who sided with the Nazis, as did many of the far right across Europe during the Nazi era. This extensive and largely unchallenged rewrite of history is a very dangerous consequence of this war; we are impelled to equate the equivalent of the Nazis with freedom-loving democrats at time when the far right is a growing political force across Europe once again. The dangers of all this should be obvious. We are playing with fire.

In most situations in modern life, we are supposed to be aware that our words have consequences; that thoughtless comments can be misinterpreted, and that others can take deep offence when we crack a silly joke or express an ill-judged opinion on matters of race, gender, sexuality or countless other sensitive subjects.

### Respecting the Other

We are taught to respect the “other”, we are instructed to treat each other with the utmost respect, as we rightly should. But when it comes to Russia and Russian people these edicts and fine obligations are cast aside and do not apply. There is an ugly free for all. It is as if all our pent up rage and frustrations caused by having to bite our tongues incessantly in all other situations are being released for once over the war in Ukraine. The debate is toxic. From reading what is written and said about Russia in the press, uttered by our politicians, commentators, pundits, tweeted by social influencers, so-called experts and from those in power in Kiev, the only realistic conclusion that can be drawn is that the venting of anti-Russian sentiments, no matter how extremely worded, has become fair game and is endorsed by those in authority.

U.S. and Soviet Soldiers Work Together During World War II.  
Photo courtesy: <https://ru.usembassy.gov/u-s-and-soviet-soldiers-work-together-during-wwii/>

Setting aside for one moment the rights and wrongs of the war in Ukraine and who bears most responsibility for prolonging the conflict, this trend towards total opinion management is a very dangerous development indeed. If we cannot allow genuine debate on such a major topic of the day, whose ramifications are so far reaching on our ordinary daily lives, there are serious questions that need to be asked about the future of modern democracy.

There are simply no limits to what we are allowed to accuse Russia of doing. It is no exaggeration to describe this as a free for all with each successive commentator appearing to be seeking to outdo the other in their dreadful, facile, mostly baseless, Russophobic remarks. I am convinced that we would not be permitted to express the same opinions about any other nation or race.

There are few people around with the courage or the foolhardiness to speak out and say loud and clear that, "enough is enough". Is everyone too timid to speak up? Are we all intimidated or are we willing accomplices in this farrago? Does the herd mentality now rule supreme over public discourse, and will this go forever unchallenged? If so, this is a step towards a tyranny the like of which is even beyond the wildest dreams of the most megalomaniacal of dictators. It is a total mind control, verging on total social control, and ominously the majority of liberals, peaceniks, humanitarians, the legally minded civil rights activists, are either remaining silent or actively colluding in the process.

Setting aside for one moment the rights and wrongs of the war in Ukraine and who bears most responsibility for prolonging the conflict, this trend towards total opinion management is a very dangerous development indeed. If we cannot allow genuine debate on such a major topic of the day, whose ramifications are so far reaching on our ordinary daily lives, there are serious questions that need to be asked about the future of modern democracy.

Perpetuating the war unnecessarily is pushing millions into direst poverty and destitution. People in the wealthy nations of Western Europe and the United States are suffering power cuts, a cost of living crisis, sky high rises in the prices of basic goods such as bread and milk, rocketing rents and mortgages, energy bills that are simply unaffordable, so that many will go without heating and possibly freeze to death during the winter months, that is if they do not starve first. In the poorest countries of the world, meanwhile, the impact of the war is far, far greater: people are going to die in their millions as famine rages and food supplies are depleted. The costs of this war are far too high.

### **An Act of Stupidity**

All wars are a failure of diplomacy; all wars are a sign of human stupidity and irresponsibility. This war must be one of the most stupid in modern history and those wishing to "see it through to the end" are the dumbest politicians ever imaginable.

Of course some derive real benefit from the war, such as the arms manufacturers, which is patently obvious; and weak political leaders such as President Joe Biden, who, apart from being physically frail was literally on his back politically following his debacle in Afghanistan and desperately needed to demonstrate his strength to restore his personal image and more importantly to reinvigorate the standing of the United States among its allies and more widely on the world stage. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine seemed perfectly designed to allow him to achieve these objectives. It was a godsend.

But it is not only those civilians who find themselves in the frontline who are suffering as a result of this terrible war; innocent people dwelling in countries thousands of miles away from the conflict zone, many of whom may not have even heard of Ukraine or at least will be quite unfamiliar with the reasons why the war is being conducted, are suffering needlessly. Many are already paying a very heavy price and will lose their lives. Children will go malnourished as victims of the famines provoked by the food shortages and high prices that have been rising as a direct result of a war that has absolutely nothing to do with them.

We must hold our political leaders to account; we must repudiate the emotional blackmail; we must resist the simplistic solutions offered up to us; we must oppose the demonisation of Russia and the cancelling of the great humanistic culture of Tolstoy and Tchaikovsky. End this folly, end this war. Despite all the hate and suffering, a just peace and moves towards a future reconciliation between peoples cannot be outside our grasp. A solution cannot be beyond the wit of human beings, can it?

To give peace a chance we need to break the spell of the Ukrainian enchantment and the West needs to learn to love Russia.

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## DR CAUVERY GANAPATHY

### COMPULSIONS OF ENERGY SECURITY: INDIA'S PURCHASE OF RUSSIAN CRUDE OIL

The war in Ukraine, given its points of origin, its nature, the parties involved, the access or proximity of the parties to nuclear weapons, and the relevance of the parties to international food and energy security, embodies the union of intersections on a most unfortunate Venn diagram of global disorder. It demands, therein, the taking of positions by nations far removed from the battlefield. Nations such as India that are called upon to make very public choices restricted not just to voting and censures but also to decide on more practical matters of basic necessity, such as if it will enhance its energy trade with the recognized aggressor in this situation. India's substantively enhanced import of energy resources from Russia post the invasion of Ukraine has in many quarters- *erroneously, one believes* - been posited as a choice New Delhi made between Moscow's perceived strategic insecurity underwriting its unlawful invasion of a sovereign state and Ukraine's right to territorial integrity and self-determination. This commentary argues that this is at best a misrepresentation of the choices India grapples with, and a false equivalence at worst.

Times of war demand that nations not seemingly in its direct crosshairs also take positions. This taking of positions is not restricted to only normative or even perfunctory discussions of which party is at fault but also to how each country chooses to maneuver an international economic and security circumstance affected by the war. This is because a fundamental offshoot of internationalism is that geographic distance from the site of hostilities minimizes only the immediate physical risks to life and liberty but not always to the way of life for countries far removed from it. Not in the case of all wars, no.

Dr Cauvery Ganapathy

About the numbers- Russia has become India's largest producer of crude oil in October, 2022 with a purchase of 1.07barrels per day (bpd). Between April and September, 2022 India imported \$14.07bn worth of Russian crude. Year on year, the figure for that period in 2021 shows an import of \$1.58bn. India's expenditure on the purchase of Russian crude last year was \$2.47bn, a figure that India's import bill of crude from Russia matched just within the months of April-May this year.

The war in Syria- by no means a Civil War- has continued for more than a decade now. Apart from the parties involved and those bordering, very few countries or populations have felt an impact. Yemen has been all but decimated by the continuing conflict for nearly as long, but life outside of it or even newsreels around the world would not have reflected this. However, when the largest grain exporter in the world attacks its neighbour (*also one among the ten largest grain producers in the world*), and when the third largest producer of energy is on one side of the divide with the vast majority of the architects and arbitrators of the international financial systems on the other, that there will be an impact on all nations, is natural. The array of complications the Ukraine war brings is visible in many uncomfortable choices that countries around the world have been forced to make. India has been no exception.

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Now, up until the war, Russia's share in India's energy basket was negligible because it did not make economic sense to import more from Russia given the comparatively high landed cost of the crude they were offering. Russian oil has always been available in the international market that India procures from. It was a conscious decision to not have increased the share of purchase from Moscow despite the abiding bilateral ties between the two States for specific reasons- none of them informed by the nature of Russia's own domestic or foreign policies.



Soldiers of a Russian military convoy and their US counterparts pose for pictures as their patrol routes intersect in an oil field near Syria's al-Qahtaniyah town in the northeastern Hasakah province, close to the border with Turkey, on October 8, 2022. (Delil Souleiman/AFP) <https://www.timesofisrael.com/russian-us-troops-in-syria-hold-their-fire-in-rare-moment-of-congeniality/>

Energy security is an important parameter on the index of human security and must be accounted for under the umbrella of human rights. The choice facing New Delhi, then, will look very different when considered through this prism. A difference of nearly \$35-36pb with the price paid for Brent crude, as it was in this period where oil imports from Russia have burgeoned, would allow India to save nearly \$850mn plus foreign exchange on its import bill. 3 to 4 months of similar savings would tantamount to multiple developmental and security goals being met, resulting in a budget that would be able to function under substantively less duress even at a time of global financial and trade downturn.

The reason India preferred to procure from others such as the Middle Eastern and African countries over Russia is attributable to multiple considerations such as price points, the delivery time, the nature of the crude brought in, how complementary a grade of crude may be to the refineries within India, how many of those refineries may be online or offline during that financial quarter based on scheduled maintenance rosters, the freight charges, anticipated bottlenecks in shipping routes etc. Just as the decision to not procure more from them prior to the war was based on hard economic and viability considerations, the reversal of that decision and increase purchase of Russian oil since early this year, was also arguably based on considerations of safeguarding the energy security of a massive population with increasing consumption needs.

Where India's purchase of Russian oil at appreciably subsidized rates post the start of the war is concerned, it is important to consider if the choice before India is at all one between the human and political rights of Ukrainians and energy trade. Energy security is an important parameter on the index of human security and must be accounted for under the umbrella of human rights. The choice facing New Delhi, then, will look very different when considered through this prism. A difference of nearly \$35-36pb with the price paid for Brent crude, as it was in this period where oil imports from Russia have burgeoned, would allow India to save nearly \$850mn plus foreign exchange on its import bill. 3 to 4 months of similar savings would tantamount to multiple developmental and security goals being met, resulting in a budget that would be able to function under substantively less duress even at a time of global financial and trade downturn. There can be, and most often are, trade-offs between principles and profits. The trade-off New Delhi is faced with in this situation, however, is different – it is arguably one between providing for and securing the most basic needs of its population or choosing to be seen to be as participating in a sanctioning exercise with fellow democracies albeit ones with different levels of developmental and even existential compulsions.

The war, coming as it has, post two very difficult years of the pandemic and the economic and structural hardships caused by it, has upended the import bills and threatened the economic stability of most nations. An increase in the price of energy resources has an immediate and direct impact on food security with connections to variables such as fertilizer rates and utilities. Compounding an already dire situation, are the constant warning signs about global economic headwinds leading to unmanageable inflation in multiple major economies dotting the pathway towards the next global recession. India spent a whopping \$119bn on its energy import bill in the fiscal year ending March, 2022.

With a daily consumption of nearly 5mn barrels, which is expected to grow to 6.5mn-7mn bpd over the next few years, India's oil import bill will not see frugality anytime in the near future. Russian oil is reported to have been purchased by India at heavy discounts close to 27%. Given the circumstances and the economic realities of the day, it would seem almost a dereliction of duty on the part of the Government of India to then, not have made use of the opportunity and bought Russian oil at the time, the quantity, and at the price it did.

The reasons behind purchasing Russia's ESPO crude from late February of 2022, are just as pertinent as the logic of choosing to reduce the purchase of that same resource in September of 2022. An increase in both freight charges and time of delivery for ESPO which has to travel from the Russian Far East and around the African continent to reach India has meant an increase in its landed cost. This, coupled with a reduction in the prices of Middle Eastern and African crude during this time-line, has meant that New Delhi has purchased much less of it in September- *although reversals in those same factors led to an uptick in purchase again in October*. The singular logic of India's actions between late February, 2022 and September, 2022 have been the same- the cause of its energy security. To then suggest that India is profiteering from a war or that the crude it buys from Russia is tainted by "Ukrainian blood" are disingenuous accusations to make.

It is true that India processes the crude it gets from Russia - *just as it does with crude from the other sources* - and the finished products are then exported to Europe. To again qualify this as profiteering is a mendacious argument to make given that New Delhi has not been deceptive about the provenance of the raw materials used for the finished products, and that European countries which have been continuing to rely on purchases from Russia at least in part, until the December deadline for the start of the embargo sets in, choose willfully to buy these products from India being fully aware of India's stance. Also, when one is in the market for energy resources in the present- *or, even historic* - milieu, it may be duplicitous to suggest that it is the provenance of crude from Russia alone that justifies a clamour for political correctness or concerns about the violation of human rights.

The removal of Russian energy supplies from the world markets will in the near to medium term, create considerable deficit and resultant instability. That, with the absence of Iranian and Venezuelan oil, is a recipe for imminent disaster. There are a million domestic political and structural reasons that bring

The pursuit of national interest is the predominant task of all governments- not least that of a democratically elected government of a country of 1.4bn where scarcity and lack of access to basic livelihood requirements continue to fester. The US administration, at least in part, appears to have made their peace with this choice made by a critical strategic partner. Choosing to act on the moral compunctions of being seen to be doing business with an obvious aggressor, over and above its own energy security compulsions, is not a luxury India can afford. It is the debated but necessary logic cut from the same cloth that supposedly underwrote the refusal of countries to share vaccines with others much less equipped to dealing with the pandemic.

hardships to the populations of Venezuela and Iran, but one among the panoply of reasons is the continuing embargo on their most lucrative export commodity. Autocratic regimes have never chosen democratic processes because of embargos, and they are not about to start now. To not change an approach when it decidedly fails to achieve the objectives it set out to or creates more issues than it resolves, is an exercise in futility and not one that must be recommended. Along that same line, the steps towards the resolution of the Ukrainian tragedy lie elsewhere, and is by no means as simplistic or unilinear as trying to ban Russian energy resources from entering the markets - *admittedly, it is one of the many in the toolkit of sanctions against Russia.* Among other considerations, the discussions regarding Ukraine- *and, some of the other post-Soviet states-* should ideally have been factored into calculations that were made at the inception of the Nordstream project, for instance. Transitions to alternative sources of energy, let alone alternative forms of it, is ideally a most urgent peacetime project and not a wartime preoccupation.

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What is happening in Ukraine is a humanitarian tragedy of monstrous proportions. No perceived insecurity justifies the assault that the Ukrainians are facing, and there must be every effort made by the international system to effect an immediate cessation of hostilities. However, to expect nations to jeopardize their inalienable national interest tied to concerns of energy security on the altar of a situation that they had no role in creating, aggravating or perpetuating, is to expect them to carry the cross in a fight where the rules of the game are neither equitable nor non-partisan, and that were most definitely not drawn by them.



Photo credit: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/27/us-ukraine-russia-war-endgame-victory-settlement-negotiation-biden-putin-zelensky/>



Dr Bisht is a PhD from Diplomatic Studies Division, Jawaharlal Nehru University, where she wrote her thesis on multi-stakeholder negotiations on security and development. She works at the intersection of strategy and philosophy and is particularly interested in non-western meanings and sources of diplomatic, dialogic practices in Asia. Her book, 'Kautilya's Arthashastra: Philosophy of Strategy' has been published by Routledge (London and New York 2020). Interested in the concept of water governance and diplomacy, her research engagement has highlighted the micro and macro narratives related to crafting and implementation of water diplomacy and governance. She has conducted stakeholder engagements and dialogues in South Asia to identify the political, cultural and ecological perspectives pertaining to rivers and riparian communities. She works on transnational relations has done consultancies with UNIFEM, ICIMOD, UNDP, IUCN, OXFAM, DFID/Asia Foundation, and Mine Action Canada, with a focus on civil society, water diplomacy, women and governance. Dr Bisht also co-led a Winter School on Inclusive Water Governance jointly organised by South Asian University (SAU), TROSA OXFAM, and UNESCO Chair of International Cooperation, Uppsala University supported by the Government of Sweden. She also co-authored and co-led a course on 'Hydro-diplomacy in South Asia' in collaboration with Dhaka University. Dr Bisht has also given lectures on water diplomacy, strategic and diplomatic thought, in various Universities including the Sushma Swaraj Foreign Services Institute in New Delhi. She has also participated in Track 2 and 1.5 dialogues on climate change.

## DR MEDHA BISHT

### RIVERS MEET THE OCEAN: A RIVERINE UNDERSTANDING FOR A MARITIME SOUTH ASIA.

The Indian Ocean region is a space for competing narratives and perspectives. While much academic and policy work has been undertaken on ways through which the Ocean can be employed to open up multiple pathways to knowledge production, practices and perspectives towards understanding spatial, temporal, civilizational and strategic histories, in this short article, I explore the value that riverine narratives can offer to understand the framings for a maritime South Asia. Significantly, this focus on the river-ocean interface, not only helps us to visibilise a South Asian perspective, but also liberate ways of thinking from Curzonian vocabularies such as frontiers and buffers, which has shaped much of the terrestrial understanding of South Asia. A move to riverine narratives of the region, which help us to see clearly the idea of Maritime South Asia is also a significant reminder to riverine ways of thinking.

This essay proceeds in three parts. First, it examines the interface between the rivers and ocean in order to emphasise the deltaic identity of South Asia. The second section brings upfront some recent patterns and discourses related to which preempt the idea of maritime South Asia. The third section foregrounds this understanding in discussions around Maritime Domain Awareness, a normative concept introduced by International Maritime Organization, and the implication this has for rivers and oceans- aspects which are intrinsic to the idea of maritime South Asia.

Dr Medha Bisht

### Rivers Meet the Ocean

Juxtaposing rivers and oceans can be significant as it makes us familiar with research around connected/ circular histories, ocean people, maritime networks, cosmopolitan port cities and the story of lost civilizations of Indian Ocean with respect to South Asia. Focusing on the literature on oceans and rivers also brings forth the distinct cultural and economic webs of layered connections which had both human and non-human dimensions. For instance, Sugata Bos describes the Indian Ocean region an inter-regional arena of human interaction, highlighting the importance of economic and cultural geographies which were a part of Indian Ocean region. Similarly, the non-human dimension, underlining the role of rivers, ports and the Ocean has also been emphasized by some scholars in making of a region.

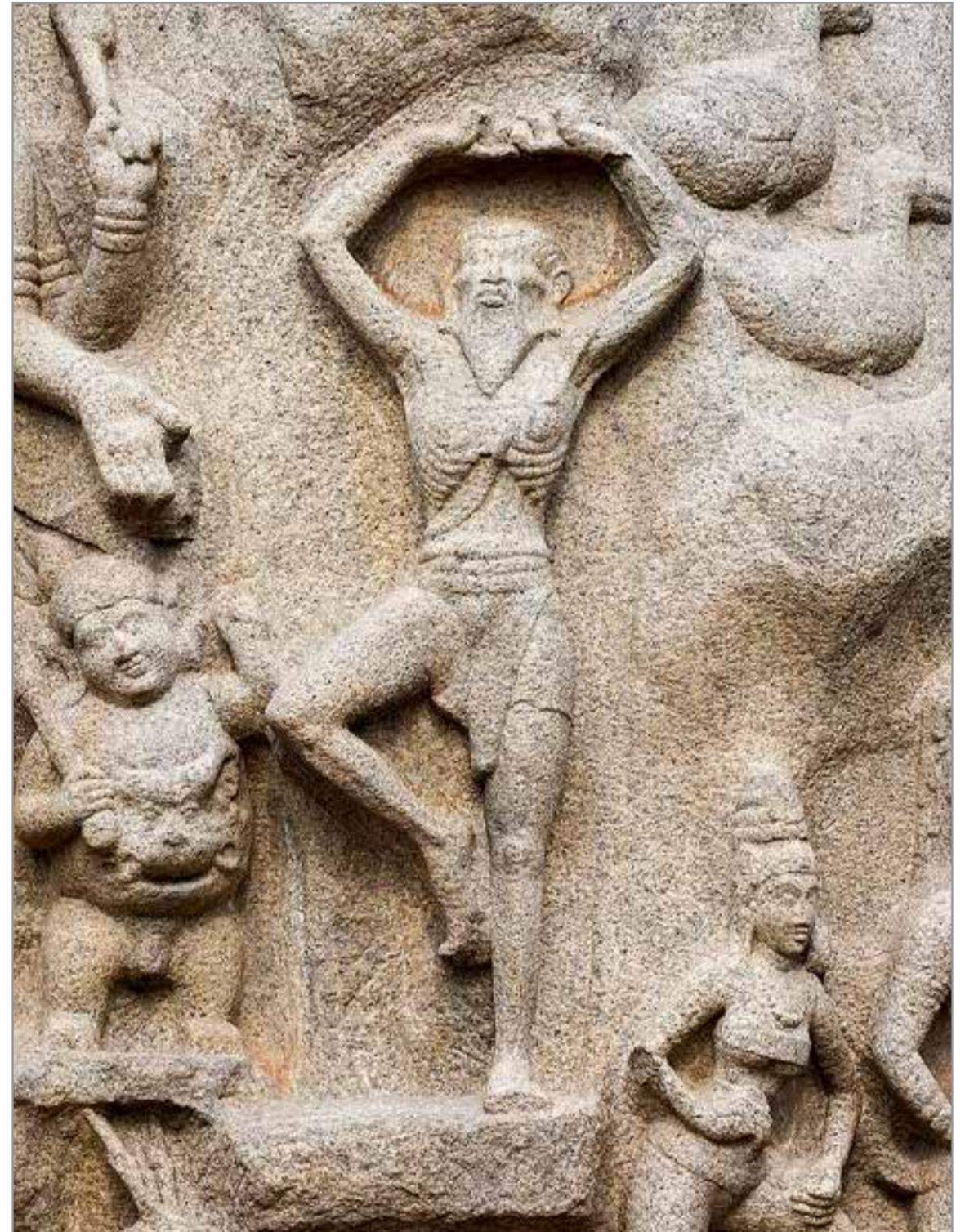
Take for example, an interesting work done by Andre Wink[2], who offers distinct insights on the geography of the rivers and changed river landscapes. By emphasizing geographical and connected dimension associated with ocean and rivets, Wink highlights how most of the ports were dependent on caravan and river traffic. He also compares some of the challenges mentioned apropos river geographies in Asia as against that of Mediterranean and Europe where he notes the role that rivers played in the rise and fall of civilisations in South Asia. In his words, “the silting –up of deep-water channels of rivers and the retreat of the sea was one form of environmental change affecting the historical development of Indian Ocean civilizations through out history. Of even more pervasive impact was the general instability of rivers everywhere, particularly because the changes resulting from river shifts were abrupt[3].” Wink notes that one of the major sources of change affecting the river plains and delta lands surrounding the Indian Ocean are not found in urban institutions but in the desert, arid zones and the maritime world of Indian Ocean, as the rich production areas of agricultural river plains in South Asia were affected by the movements of nomadic and sea-faring people.[4] Similarly Sunil Amrith notes the connectedness between the rivers and the deltaic identity of South Asian cities and countries, where the Ganges, Brahmaputra, Meghna, Godavari, Kaveri and Krishna merge into the sea, carrying rich accumulation of silt[5]. Commenting on the continuum between the Himalayas and the Bay, William Schendel has noted, ‘Bangladesh is the Himalayas flattened out[6]’.



Photograph © Sourav Jourdar

Infact, tracing the earlier narratives around rivers, there are many hymns devoted to water. Mythically, Varuna is the god of the water and texts reveals that he is considered the great superintendent of the cosmic moral order[7] (rita). Thus, water inevitably has been considered the source of human life and cradle of rise and fall for civilization—the source behind forces of creation and forces of destruction. Similarly, the Puranas underline the link between ocean and the sky, and highlights the import of myths which suggests the wise channelization of river systems through human efforts. For instance, the story of Bhagiratha, who had to undertake great austerities to bring Ganga to the Earth is not unknown to us. Shiva's intervention in the descent of Ganga to Earth is also insightful as Vatsyayan points out meticulously, "Shiva's matted hair or the jatas piled high, delaying the cascading current which then in meandering through the labyrinths of the forest of his *jatas* lost its force, was *tamed* and *channeled*. Its water descended gently to the Himalayas and then majestically to the Indian planes, and thus the earth and its creatures were rejuvenated for she was the life-giving boon"[8]. These myths not only imply the value of water but also succinctly reveal the wisdom which is needed for maintain the balance of the eco-system as a whole, and also brings upfront the unique ecological cartography of South Asia.

The uniqueness of the Himalayas and the Ocean is not just confined to narratives, myths and parables with India's eastern neighbours. The Indus Basin, which covers an area of roughly 11,65,500 square kilometre reveal the significance of major and minor river systems, giving plural meanings to a unique deltaic identity of South Asia. Significantly, all the rivers flowing through the Basin, have distinct political, social, cultural narrative. For instance, while it was on the banks of River Ravi that the pledge of Purna Swaraj (complete self-rule in colonial India was undertaken), the River also bears a symbolic significance as Sikhism was founded in the Majha region (the area between River Beas and Ravi), and continues to hold spiritual and political relevance to the sentiments across the border.[9] River Chenab on its part has been an abode for Sufi poets and saints. Often remembered as the River of lovers, which narrated stories having a tragic ending, the Chenab has also inspired poets like Iqbal, Shiv Kumar Batalvi and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, who were born and brought up in villages located near the river[10]. While River Jhelum is often reminisced with tales related to the chivalry of Porus and generosity of Alexander the Great, as the great battle of Hydapus would tell us, these stories are often linked to the rise and fall of empires.



Bhagiratha in yogic posture for 700 years, as per legend. Arjuna's Penance. Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu, India. Photograph © Timothy A. Gonsalves (Tagooty), VGP 1st Main Road, Uthandi, Chennai, Tamilnadu, India. Wikipedia.



Confluence of Indus and Zaskar rivers. The Indus is at the left of the picture, flowing left-to-right; the Zaskar, carrying more water, comes in from the top of the picture. Photograph © Sourav Jourdar.

Christened with multiple names such as the Nilab, Sher Dariya, Purali, Samundar, Senge Tsangpo, Indus has been a signifier of plurality of identity and thought systems[11]. With these civilisational and cultural narratives going back to a recorded past of almost 8000-9000 years, the post-colonial strategic narratives of India and Pakistan are dwarfed given their unidimensional focus towards rationalisation of water war thesis where rivers are often presented as a bargaining chip in diplomatic engagement. While these approaches serve the purpose of distributive bargaining strategies often freezing diplomatic engagements into a non-zero sum framework, they ignore the identity of rivers as dynamic systems, which need dynamic/innovative solutions. Thus, the changing ecological and social variables determining the flows, spatial identity, and needs of the river and its eco-system, which might need scalar interventions often get obfuscated in macro discourses. This as this article argues is a reflection of strategic and civilizations myopia, and perhaps revisiting the idea of maritime South Asia would help resuscitate alternate ways of dealing with the gap that exists between the macro and the micro narratives.

The riverine narratives are significant because they offer a relational yet holistic perspective. Defying simplistic linear solutions, which talk about partitioning and rationalisation of waters, they are often defined as complex systems and the reason for this is the dendritic structure of rivers which resembles the branching of trees which has posed a challenge to both scholars and practitioners alike.

However, when one starts establishing a conversation between rivers as dynamic political, social and ecological systems, political scientists, ecologists and culturalists often end up in a shouting match. While IR scholars talk about competitive riparian behaviour, with states as key actors enjoying the privilege of political representation, the ecologists are committed towards integrating the independent agency of nature, foregrounding an autonomous place for nature in history. The culturalists on the other hand highlight the cultural construction of the environment. For them meaning is determined by the linguistic and social contexts associated with them. Michael Thompson[12] explains this through the cultural theory, and points out that different forces at work which represent dissimilar, incommensurable interests, can only be resolved by embracing 'plural rationalities framework.

In 2000, India along with five of the Mekong nations (Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) established the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC), which emphasised cooperation in the field of tourism, culture, education and transport linkages.

### **Riverine South Asia: From Terrestrial to a Maritime Centric Understanding.**

The term South Asia was a negotiated compromise which goes back to the 1980s, when the idea of SARC was formalised. The idea of institutionalising South Asia did materialise, but hinged on a compromise formula of not bringing divisive issues sensitive to the national security and sovereignty of state to the multilateral forum. The voting pattern, which SAARC followed, was based on consensus rather than majority voting further delayed development projects due to existing trust deficit and is therefore significant in this respect. Scholars have offered multiple reasons why South Asians states have privileged territoriality (geo-political reasoning) over its overlapping relational - cultural and civilizational pasts (non-geo-political reasoning).

Sanjay Chaturvedi, makes an appealing argument in this regard, when he notes, “the moment of territorial partition finally arrived on the subcontinent when non-geopolitical reasoning and various forms of resistance either succumbed to or were subsumed within the overall geopolitical reasoning and representations deployed by hegemonic group(s)”[13] The argument offered by Chaturvedi is an attempt to forward the logic of excessive geopolitics, which he admits, was sustained by the territorial logic of a “reflexive otherness”[14]. This ‘reflexive otherness’ has been captured by Ashis Nandy, who notes, “South Asia is the only region in the world where most states define themselves not by what they are, but by what they are not. Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal try desperately not to be India; Bangladesh has taken up the more onerous responsibility of avoiding being both India and Pakistan”[15]. This fear and the distrust of the other, as a common syndrome in shaping the nature of South Asian collective, has also found its resonance in the writings of scholars like Pratap Bhanu Mehta, who argues that the fear of the other has been manufactured to consolidate the internal unity of nation states in South Asia.[16] Mehta notes only “when states in the region [would reach] a state of maturity where they do not need to fear the other to secure their sense of self and identity”, would South Asian states move forward from a restrictive geo-strategic construct to a more progressive geo-cultural/civilizational or relational frame[17]. The logic of South Asia identity creation, thus has found a fractured meaning for most of the South Asian states, and over the years has fossilized its understanding as a geo-strategic construct, giving direction to a distinct security diplomacy.[18]

Against this backdrop, the sub-regional turn in South Asia merits attention, which has been emerging in a gradualistic manner in the last few decades and offers a dawn of hope for a promising shift. There are three broad approaches, which can identify a shift in pattern. The Top-Bottom Approach (TBA), which one say was also a minimalist approach to regional cooperation. The second is the Building Block Approach (BBA), which comes across as gradualistic approach to regional cooperation and a more integrationist approach which can be termed as a relational approach.

The Top-Bottom Approach is ideationally closer to the SARC initiative of the 1980s, which focussed on regionalism and picked up pace because it was successful in arriving at an overlapping consensus on some key, non-confrontational development issues in South Asia.[19] The Building Block Approach, picked up in the 1990s. It was introduced in the Ninth Male Summit of SAARC, when the SAARC member countries agreed to focus on specific projects for ‘meeting the needs of three or more member states’.[20] The assumption behind the BBA was that that it would be based on a pragmatic approach and collaborate with countries willing to cooperate, which could be building blocks for cooperation.

This was taken forward through the vision of South Asia Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) and in 2000, the South Asian Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) was launched with assistance from ADB, with six priority sectors that included transport, energy and power, tourism, environment, trade, investment and private sector cooperation and communication and information technology. [21,22] This vision was extended to South East Asia, through India’s Act East Policy, where it was argued that “India is Acting East through its sub-regions”[23]. In 2000, India along with five of the Mekong nations (Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) established the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC), which emphasised cooperation in the field of tourism, culture, education and transport linkages.

In many ways these approaches gave credence to emerging multi-modal connectivity projects, which consolidated thinking towards Asian sub-regionalism. However, it is only in last five years that these approaches appear to have gained traction in policy debates and analysis, and can be now termed as an integrationist approach.



The Mekong River, Laos. Photograph © Mark Ulyseas.

Underwater domain Awareness is a initiative which has been taken up by the Maritime Research Centre in Pune. The focus is on pooling of resources and synergising the efforts across stakeholders, namely maritime security, blue economy, marine environment and disaster management and science and technology.

### The Integrationist Approach

The Integrationist Approach can be said to have gained momentum in 2014, when Modi announced his neighbourhood first policy. It is interesting to note that BBIN cooperation while drawing from Article 7 of SAARC [24] Charter, has not been constituted as part of SAARC, with India emerging as a bridge between Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, analysts have revisited this term as 'new regionalism' and 'development regionalism' For instance Yhome and Maini write that, 'sustainable development and management has been at the core of India's cooperation at the regional and sub-regional groupings and this will have implications on regional resources such as water and energy[25]. A similar emphasis underlining sustainable development was seen in the SAGAR vision, articulated in 2015. Acronymed as the SAGAR speech, Security and Growth for All was delivered by Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, in Mauritius on March 12,2015. Inaugurating the commissioning of the customised Open Patrol Vessel, Barracuda, the speech highlighted the importance of collaborative power for securing the freedom, safety and prosperity of the Indo- Pacific. Further Modi highlighted, "our more recent history has focussed our attention on continental neighbourhood. But India has been shaped in more ways by the sea around us." He further added, "Our vision for the Indian Ocean region is rooted in advancing cooperation in our region , and to use our capabilities for the benefit of all, in our common maritime home[26]"

This shift in India's maritime neighbourhood, not only brought into centre-stage the role of India's island neighbours, but also littoral states such as Bangladesh. Further, there is fair emphasis (see point four of the SAGAR speech) on 'sustainable development for all'. He notes, "we also seek a more integrated and cooperative future in the region that enhances the prospects for sustainable development for all. We must promote greater collaboration in trade, tourism and investment; infrastructure development; marine science and technology; sustainable fisheries; protection of marine environment; and, overall development of Ocean or Blue Economy. For those who live by the ocean, climate change is not an issue of debate but a serious threat to existence. We must assume leadership in our region and call for a more concerted and fair global action to address the challenge of climate change." While much has been written on India's sub-regional turn and the Sagar speech, little attention has been paid to how it could offer us an integrationist vision for a maritime South Asia. The framework, which needs deliberation in this backdrop is the nature of maritime South Asia, which hinges on the exercise of collaborative power built around both the terrestrial (riverine) and maritime

space. Revisiting this vision conveyed through SAGAR speech from the lens of SDG-14 becomes fundamental as it entails responsibilities towards protecting the marine ecological environment, strengthening communication, sharing development achievements and promoting global blue partnerships. [27] Two primary pillars which offer effective facilitation of SDG -14 are fisheries and disaster management. These two specific issue areas also reveal the interconnections between ocean and rivers thus reinforcing the vision of SDG -14, but also give a new identity to South Asia, which is composed of three littoral states (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh), three landlocked states (Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal) and two island states (Maldives and Sri Lanka).

The two issue areas that can give meaning to this strategic vision as mentioned before are climate action and two sustainable development goals – SDG- 13 and 14, i.e. Climate Action and Life Below Water respectively. The following pages focuses on of these goals, SDG 14, and argues ways through which it can endow a strategic vision to maritime South Asia, elaborating on the specific approach of Underwater Domain Awareness.

### Maritime South Asia and Under Water Domain Awareness

Underwater domain Awareness is a initiative which has been taken up by the Maritime Research Centre in Pune. The focus is on pooling of resources and synergising the efforts across stakeholders, namely maritime security, blue economy, marine environment and disaster management and science and technology. While much has been written on this subject[28], the interface of rivers and sea has not been explored enough[29]. A good example[30] of this was the growing realisation by India and Bangladesh over the depleting stocks of Hilsa fish (which migrates between fresh water and sea water) after the construction of Farakkha Barrage. The cooperative approaches led by civil society not only conveyed the social and environmental consequences of the disruptions undertaken on rivers impacting the Hilsa fish but also suggested multi-scale responses to address the problem. Similarly, disaster management, which emphasises the resilience of rivers and ocean becomes a key goal for actors to achieve the twin goal of green and blue economy. Enhancing resilience of rivers and ocean means that a holistic framework which privileges an eco-systems perspective, is emphasised, as the meaning of river is not just restricted to the flowing water but also the protection of biodiversity, sediment, wetlands, marine resources which sustain the health of the rivers per se.

Similarly the ocean is known to “deliver essential public goods and services such as protection from natural hazards for the coastal population and carbon-storage in the form of blue carbon sinks, such as mangrove forests, sea grass beds, and vegetated ocean habitats which can sequester five times the amounts of carbon absorbed by tropical forests”. Enhancing resilience of rivers and oceans thus become important building blocks for achieving sustainable development of ocean and rivers.

While a short reflection on ocean- rivers interface, such ideas need further deliberation and research by scholars. Common Futures, Connectivity and Community are tied to the larger discourses around sub-regional and Indo-Pacific turn in discourses around India’s Foreign Policy. The first step for India’s Neighbourhood First Policy is to start conceptualising the vision of a Maritime South Asia.

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## DR ASHOK SHARMA

### INDIA AND AUSTRALIA TOWARDS A ROBUST COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

India and Australia are witnessing an all time high relations with extraordinary pace. Though both nations have been forging their ties for more than a decade and a half, the pace has not been to the extent the way it has accelerated during the COVID-19 outbreak. This has resulted in the signing of agreements between India and Australia and finally, is moving at a pace that both nations off-late have been trying to achieve. This is mainly seen in the context of many synergies that both countries have, but what has accelerated the India-Australia relationship are the geoeconomic and geostrategic factors amidst the unfolding geopolitics for the dominance of the Indo-Pacific, which is primarily driven by an assertive and powerful China. Consequently, the converging strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific have enabled both India and Australia to build trust and confidence through high profile ministers' visits and summit meetings, enhance their economic and defence ties, and set the relationship towards a robust India-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP).

#### **India and Australia Towards a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership:**

India past, India and Australia struggled to forge a substantial strategic ties despite the two countries sharing many similarities. The narratives of Cricket, Commonwealth, and Curry were central to the relationship for a prolonged time. The relationship was mainly limited to the economic sphere, which was primarily sustained by exports of minerals and other natural resources, as well as by tourism and education. Additionally, the momentum of the relationship between Australia and India was impeded by India's non-signatory status to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Australian government's inconsistent stance on the sale of uranium to India.

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Since it began in 2011, the [Adani Carmichael coal mining project](#), crucial to India's future energy needs, encountered fierce opposition in Australia, hindering the momentum of Australia-India relations and not letting realise its full potential.

However, both sides continued their engagement to improve their ties. Since the signing of the Australia-India Civil Nuclear Agreement and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Australia in 2014, both nations' foreign policies have placed a priority on one another. Since then, both have steadily advanced diplomatically and politically, with a surge in the frequency of prominent ministers and officials visiting each other's nations and summit-level conferences.

### **India and Australia Economic Cooperation Trade Agreement: Towards a Resilient Global Supply Chain**

In order to boost bilateral trade, reduce reliance on China, and secure a strong global supply chain, India and Australia have been working to finalise the free trade agreement. Their economies' commonalities and synergies, as well as their shared security objectives, serve as the driving forces behind this initiative. The India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (IndAus [ECTA](#)), which was signed on April 2, 2022, took place during the outbreak. The deal, which has been dubbed a "watershed moment" in India-Australian relations, intends to strengthen the two countries' economic ties.

According to the ECTA, both parties concurred to eliminate customs taxes on exports from each other's nations. Per the agreement, 85% of Australian exports to India would be tariff-free, while 96% of Indian exports to Australia would be duty-free. Australian wines brought into India will now have [MFN status](#), as decided. High-quality Australian wine that is duty-free may take some time to reach Indian consumers, though, as India has made a specific promise to lower the rate of customs taxes over ten years, based on the CIF value.

The Australian government has also eliminated duties gradually over a five-year period on a number of strategic imports coming from India, including steel products. For the purpose of preventing double taxation on offshore services, both governments have agreed to change their [domestic legislation](#).



Photograph:  
<https://www.tpci.in/indiabusinesstrade/blogs/india-australia-trade-pact-an-opportunity-to-unlock-potential/>

In addition, it's anticipated that the visa discussions would expand immigration and cross-border mobility, which might lengthen the time Indian professionals and students can stay in Australia on work-search visas.

Additionally, it is anticipated that the visa discussions will improve cross-border mobility and immigration, which may lengthen the period of stay for Indian students and professionals on work-search visas in Australia. Overall, the agreement promises to nearly treble trade, generate jobs in both countries—including one million jobs in India over the next five years—and strengthen economic connections by reducing border crossings between the two Indo-Pacific countries. In the next five years, the ECTA wants to boost bilateral commerce from \$27 billion to \$45–50 billion.

[The ECTA, a significant advancement in free trade agreement negotiations](#), sends a strong message to the businesses of both countries that “one of the biggest doors” is now open and could leverage the huge potential of the two dynamic regional economies. With the signing of the ECTA within such a short period of time, India-Australian bilateral relations have taken a turn for the better. Growing mutual trust and confidence between the two countries is leading towards a strong Australia-India comprehensive strategic cooperation that benefits both democracies by leveraging the current strategic scenario.

The swift progress on ECTA was further emphasised by [the second visit of Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar on October 10, 2022](#). During the Sixth Annual Foreign Ministers' Framework Dialogue, crucial to achieving the goal of strengthening their economic connections, both the Australian and Indian foreign ministers, Penny Wong and S. Jaishankar emphasised on promoting and developing economic ties, particularly through the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA).

Both nations have been taking action to improve the global supply chain, which China has come to dominate, as they recognise the need of maintaining and fortifying the multilateral trading system's rules-based structure. The move by China to leverage the humanitarian crisis following the COVID-19 outbreak to achieve its geopolitical objectives has heightened the need to regulate global supply chains.

India has prized strategic autonomy and prefers to be a strategic partner rather than an ally, despite strengthening defence ties with friendly nations like the United States. As a result, both India and the other three members of the Quad must have confidence in one another. The India-Australia 2plus2 dialogue underpins the Quad, a strong Indo-Pacific strategy to deter China's intentions to dominate the region.

India has become important in rebuilding the global supply chain since it is thought to be the only country that can equal the manufacturing scale of China. The current Albanese government and the leadership of Australia, particularly past Prime Ministers Scott Morrison and Tony Abbott, have emphasised the importance of India in rebuilding the global supply chain.

### **India-Australia 2+2 Dialogue: Enhancing Diplomatic and Defence Collaboration**

In a significant development to give a further boost to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, on September 10–12, [India and Australia had their first 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in New Delhi](#). The 2+2 dialogue aims to institutionalise and enhance defence connections and coordination between pertinent Australian and Indian entities. The strategic alignment in the Indo-Pacific and the potential for cooperation in science, technology, and research and development are the driving forces behind Australia and India's defence ties. The economic consequences of this agreement are much broader, since it will strengthen defence commerce as well as create jobs. There is a huge opportunity for both countries to work together to maximize their potential in the defence industry sector. In the Indo-Pacific region, both countries are committed to maritime security, counter-piracy and counter-terrorism, disaster relief, and international norms and rules-based order. The 2 plus 2 format will facilitate the diplomatic process between Australia and India and clear up any misunderstandings that may hinder the relationship. Defence drills will be more frequent under the 2plus2 format, which will improve trust, coordination, and interoperability between the two forces.

The 2 plus 2 dialogue between India and Australia is critical. [India has this agreement with a few selected nations, notably the Quad nations of the US and Japan](#). Since the 1992 Malabar exercise, India and the United States have been doing Malabar exercise, with Japan joining in 2015. Australia has a security alliance with the US and Japan through the Trilateral Security Dialogue. India and Australia have yet to deepen their defence ties, though. India has prized strategic autonomy and prefers to be a strategic partner rather than an ally, despite strengthening defence ties with friendly nations like the United States. As a result, both India and the other three members of the Quad must have confidence in one another. The India-Australia 2plus2 dialogue underpins the Quad, a strong Indo-Pacific strategy to deter China's intentions to dominate the region.

The regular summit-level meetings and high-profile visits have contributed to the development of mutual trust, understanding, and confidence between Australia and India at the top levels and aided to determine the direction of the CSP. The pace of India-Australian relations, which could be further determined by the frequency of interaction at the summit and ministerial level, including three prime ministerial virtual summit level meetings in a month in 2022, reflects the trust-building process. The relationship between the two countries is at an all-time high.

#### **China's Assertiveness, COVID-19 Security Challenges, and the Race for Indo-Pacific Dominance:**

Within a few months following the outbreak, China's intention to use the worst humanitarian disaster in history for its own geopolitical ends, which were most obvious in the Indo-Pacific, became explicit. Despite being Australia's and India's largest trading partner, China has been unable to soothe their worries regarding Beijing's aggressive and authoritarian push under the Xi Jinping administration. China's posture has been the largest cause of concern for both India and Australia when it comes to the great game for dominance of the Indo-Pacific. The pace of relations between Australia and India has been further hastened by China's brash display of its economic might and assertive military posture in the Indo-Pacific. The border dispute between China and India resulted in a violent collision, and Australia's relations with China on the diplomatic and commercial fronts have deteriorated to an all-time low.

Consequently, Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Scott Morrison, on June 4, 2020, during the India-Australia Leaders' Virtual Summit, upgraded the India-Australia relationship from the bilateral Strategic Partnership inked in 2009 to the [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#). The emphasis was on creating a thriving, open, and stable post-COVID-19 world, therefore both parties reached agreements on a Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement and a Defence Science and Technology Arrangement in addition to coordinating responses to COVID-19. India and Australia joined the Quad defence exercise in November 2020, as well as the first Quad summit with the US and Japan, where it was decided to go beyond just a military partnership and cooperate to address non-traditional security challenges, such as those brought on by the COVID-19 outbreak.

The regular summit-level meetings and high-profile visits have contributed to the development of mutual trust, understanding, and confidence between Australia and India at the top levels and aided to determine the direction of the CSP. The pace of India-Australian relations, which could be further determined by the frequency of interaction at the summit and ministerial level, including three prime ministerial virtual summit level meetings in a month in 2022, reflects the trust-building process. The relationship between the two countries is at an all-time high.

This occurred during the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and its importance is highlighted by India's conflicting stance on the Ukrainian situation at [the conference of the Quad foreign ministers](#). India took a neutral stance, abstained on nearly all UN resolutions criticising Russia's action, and sought to find a peaceful settlement through negotiation. Despite India's contrasting views on Russia, New Delhi and Canberra have adopted a practical stance and remain committed to strengthen the CSP.

Both nations' involvement in the Indo-Pacific has widened. The resolve to fully implement the CSP, which is built on mutual trust and understanding, common interests, and shared democratic and rule-of-law norms, has been reiterated by both the summit level meetings and the visiting ministers amidst China's push for dominance in the Indo-Pacific. These high profile engagements have been important in highlighting the significance of continuing to work towards their shared objective of developing an Indo-Pacific region that is open, free, prosperous, and governed by laws.

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## DR DEBARATI HALDER

### FROM CRIMINAL TRIBES TO 'VICTIMS' OF COLONIALISM

**De-Stigmatizing of Narikuravar community of Tamil Nadu through Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009: A socio-legal analysis**

Due to the arbitrary decisions of the colonial rulers several tribal communities were enlisted as criminal tribes. After the independence, the government of India had delisted all such tribes and had abolished the Criminal Tribes Act. But this has not erased the stigma from specific tribal groups including the Narikuravar tribal community of Tamil Nadu. The nomadic tribal community is still considered as a community of habitual offenders and members of the tribal community including the children may face social exclusion.

This short essay argues that proper implementation of Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 may de-stigmatize the tribal community. Such implementation may necessarily need awareness building among the Narikuravar community about the need for basic school education for the children and awareness building among general individuals about the equality rights of the Narikuravar community so that the members of the community may not face social exclusion.



Dr. Debarati Halder

This essay, argues that even though the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 has made it possible for all children including children from socio-economically backward classes to access basic education, it could not fully erase the stigma of criminalizing the Narikuravar community as a whole even though not everyone of the community may be accused or convicted for offences.

The Directive Principles of State policy of the Constitution of India through Articles 41 (right to work, education and to public assistance in certain cases), 45 (provision for early childhood care and education to children below the age of six years), and 46 (Promotion of education and economic interests of SC, ST, and other weaker sections) had made the State responsible for creating policies for ensuring right to equality and education for all including socio-economically backward classes of India. It was not before 2009 that a part of this noble set of principles was made into reality by creating special fundamental rights for free and compulsory education for all children through Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act). This helped several children from under-privileged communities and socio-economically backward regions to get standard education, which in turn helped them to be self-sufficient to a certain extent (Bhattacharjee, 2019).[1] It has been considered as an established fact that education may lead an individual to a positive life. It may make him/her understand basic societal values, rights and wrongs (Wigley, S. and Akkoyunlu-Wigley, A., 2006).[2] Access to education makes individuals or groups or communities from under-privileged sectors empowered. Right to education coupled with right to life and right to equal opportunities may also ensure reformation of individuals who may had to choose criminal activities for survival.

This short essay aims to address the issue of de-stigmatization of Narikuravar community of Tamil Nadu by way of enabling the children of the community to avail basic education and thereby empowering the entire community about their basic rights. In the colonial era several tribal communities were considered as criminal tribes (Nigam, 1990)[3] and were included within the category of criminal tribes under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1872. The main reason for listing such communities within the Criminal Tribes Act was the adamancy of the tribal communities against the colonial rules. These tribal communities were considered as barbaric tribes and dangerous for civilized people (Dayal, 2009).[4] Narikuravar community of Tamil Nadu (whose origin may be traced to Gujarat several centuries ago), originally a nomadic tribal community, were also categorized as criminal tribes under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1872 (Muhammed Atheeque, P.P. and Nishanthi, R., 2016).[5]

This essay, argues that even though the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 has made it possible for all children including children from socio-economically backward classes to access basic education, it could not fully erase the stigma of criminalizing the Narikuravar community as a whole even though not everyone of the community may be accused or convicted for offences.

Due to partial lockdowns, shortage of time and lack of time, the author could not conduct any empirical study to understand the actual scenario in the contemporary time. Hence the author had relied upon secondary sources including academic articles and news reports from authentic sources.

### **Criminal Tribes Act and its significance on the contemporary social status of Narikuravar community**

The colonial rulers in Asia were hugely influenced by Born Criminal Theory of Lombroso, an eminent Italian criminologist. This theory suggests that certain groups of criminals may be distinguished by unique physical characteristics and personality traits (Wolfgang, 1961).[6] Resultant the British rulers in Indian subcontinent identified certain groups of people who did not fall in the category of '*civilized natives*' that will be obeying them and their commands which were mostly brutal for the '*ruled*'. These groups included several tribal communities who successfully resisted foreign intruders in their habitats for generations. They had their own social customs and life styles which were influenced by developing technologies, but did not change drastically like their '*civilized*' counterparts living in cities and rural areas who were regulated by colonial rules. These tribal communities also participated in mini revolts against the colonial rulers. This made the British rulers to enact Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 to permanently include members of such selected tribal communities as criminal tribes (Kapadia, 1952).[7] The members of the enlisted tribal community were considered as habitual offenders who were often accused of doing petty to heavy offences.

The Criminal Tribes Act had categorically stated that offences committed by members of these communities would be treated as non bailable offences (Kapadia, 1952).[8] Later, post-independence, the government of India delisted all such tribes and new schedules were prepared to reintegrate them in the mainstream society by listing them scheduled tribes and scheduled castes. Such listing for positive benefit of the said communities including the Narikuravar communities were made hoping that such listing may help them to come out of the stigma of being '*criminal tribes*'. But several contemporary literature would show that the members of these communities including the Narikuravar community continue to live in extremely poor and unhygienic conditions which may force them to take up certain criminal activities (Muhammed Atheeque, P.P. and Nishanthi, R., 2016; Jayachithra, J., 1992).[9]

Researchers have shown that Narikuravar parents preferred to engage children in selling beads, safety pins, cheap jewelries at public places including bus stands and railway stations etc, rather than sending the children for schools (Balaji, C., 2018).[11] The only attracting point for going to the school may be having mid-day meal. But that may not always encourage the community to send the children to school. The adults and the children in the Narikuravar community are still seen as probable offenders.

This has significantly restricted the Narikuravar community's access to right to education as well. The above mentioned literature would show that even though the government and non-government stakeholders have tried to provide basic education to the children of Narikuravar community, the latter suffer from social exclusion. Non-Narikuravar parents may not allow their children to interact with Narikuravar children. The latter may often be accused of petty theft even if they may not have done the same in reality.

### **Can The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 remove the stigmatization?**

Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 has ensured that no child remains 'uneducated' and every child gets basic education. But a thorough reading of the statute would show that the statute does not give any promise to job after finishing the basic education. Right to education very loosely ensures that children from socio-economically backward classes, accessing school education must also get proper nutritious meal while they are accessing free education. [10] It also expands its scopes to ensure rights against child labor including hazardous work. But there are not much data or research to show that children from Narikuravar community could get such benefits.

Researchers have shown that Narikuravar parents preferred to engage children in selling beads, safety pins, cheap jewelries at public places including bus stands and railway stations etc, rather than sending the children for schools (Balaji, C., 2018).[11] The only attracting point for going to the school may be having mid-day meal. But that may not always encourage the community to send the children to school. The adults and the children in the Narikuravar community are still seen as probable offenders. This author had personally observed that common people may not consider to socialize with the people from Narikuravar community because of the presumption about their habits and life style. But not to forget, the government of Tamil Nadu had created Narikuravar welfare boards to provide them socio-economic assistance including assistance for educational scholarships, accidental death assistance, housing, marriage assistance, old age pension etc.[12] These welfare Boards along with government and non-government stakeholders had been trying tirelessly for the development of the Narikuravar community.



Photograph:  
<https://ecomwel.org/narikuravar/>

India has seen developments in several sectors including science and technology, globalization, trade etc. But there are several groups of people who may not have received their rights because of age-old stigmatization created by colonial rulers, which gained more strength due to socio-cultural divisions in the Indian society as a whole. Access to free and compulsory education by children of Narikuravar community must be audited by the government to understand whether the children from the said community are able to continue their education and whether they are facing any challenges in this regard.

As may be seen from the above discussion, the present government policies and statutes like the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 offer de-stigmatization of the Narikuravar community, which was once considered as a criminal tribe. The Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 further ensured right to access justice for the socio-economically challenged members of backward, most backward and scheduled tribes and castes free of cost. But Narikuravar community may not get full benefits of these policies, schemes and welfare statutes because they may not be receiving required education for understanding their rights or they may not be aware of their rights. The main problem centers around the issue of awareness among general people about the rights of the Narikuravar community and convincing the later to avail their rights and accept the requirements for continuing school education for their children like daily attendance, joining skill developing programs, availing the government benefits for accessing self-help groups for economic development etc.

**Conclusion and suggestion:** India has seen developments in several sectors including science and technology, globalization, trade etc. But there are several groups of people who may not have received their rights because of age-old stigmatization created by colonial rulers, which gained more strength due to socio-cultural divisions in the Indian society as a whole. Access to free and compulsory education by children of Narikuravar community must be audited by the government to understand whether the children from the said community are able to continue their education and whether they are facing any challenges in this regard. The government must also engage NGOs, public and private universities and law schools to empower the Narikuravar community to realize their basic fundamental rights. It is necessary to see whether the children from such communities are being assisted for availing higher education or vocational courses which may make them market ready. It is also necessary to create awareness in general public about the unfortunate past of the Narikuravar community which made them stigmatized as a criminal tribe. Both the mainstream society and the Narikuravar community must trust each other to enable the later to access basic rights and improve their socio-economic status. Unless such efforts are initiated and properly funded and monitored by the government, the Narikuravar community may continue to lag behind and remain stigmatized in spite of enactment of welfare statutes and policies by the government.

#### End Notes

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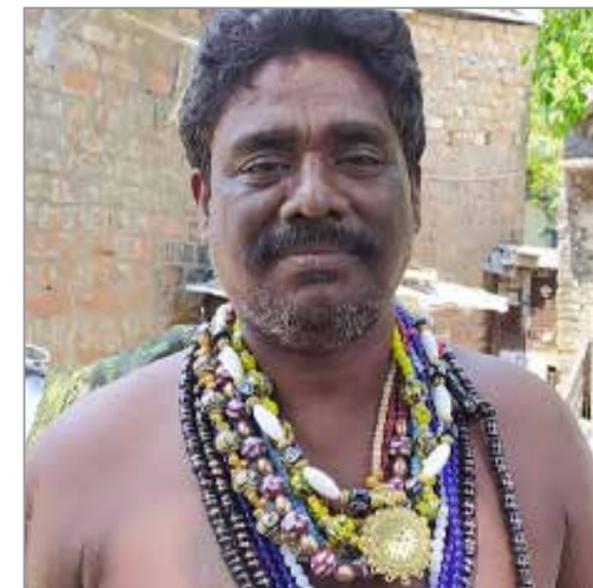
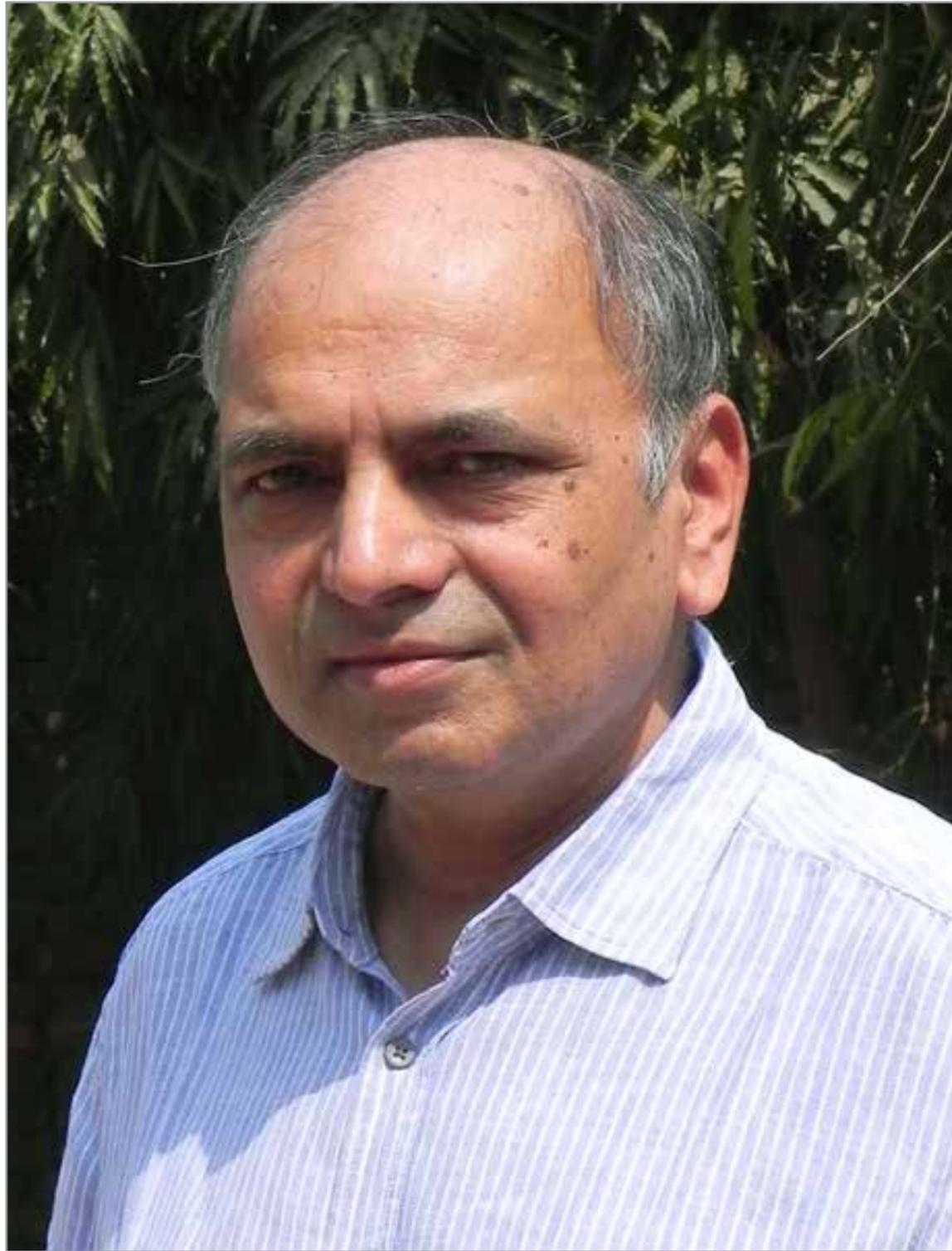


Photo credit: <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/13/21737/The-Narikuravars-Fight-for-Their-Rights>



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## PROFESSOR GANESH N DEVY

### THE BHARAT JODO YATRA

### FOR THE DREAMS YET NOT REALISED

1942 was a most turbulent year. In India, the Muslim League had already demanded a separate nation for Muslims, and the air was charged with communalism. The war in Europe had spread to other continents and the British wanted India to support their war effort. The Cripps Mission was sent to India in March 1942. Its demand that India participate in the war caused tremendous resentment in the country, especially because there was no prior consultation with Indian leaders. Outside India, the Indian National Army (INA) was created under Rash Behari Bose and its command handed over to Subhash Chandra Bose later that year. Hitler's forces were deep inside Russia. Erwin Rommel, a decorated general nicknamed 'Desert Fox', had trounced the Allies in the African war theatre. In June 1942, Rommel took tens of thousands of troops prisoners in Tobruk. Also in June 1942, Hitler ordered the massacre in Czechoslovakia's Lidice village, which was reduced to ashes on his orders. On 4 July 1942, German bombers attacked an Arctic convoy of the Allies, codenamed PQ17, sending it into such disarray that for weeks together 100,000 tonnes of cargo, including 210 planes and 3,350 vehicles, went missing. Within the Congress itself, there were heated debates on the path ahead, and socialist factions found it necessary to form breakaway organisations and <dal>s. The scene was very different a decade ago.

Professor Ganesh N Devy

Not everyone was convinced of Gandhi's method of resistance even in 1942, even after he had demonstrated what was possible over the previous decades. How can you fight the military might of the colonial power and fascists with non-violence and non-cooperation, his critics would ask. Similar doubts are being expressed today about the Bharat Jodo Yatra. How will this long march combat the strong-arm politics of the adversary? How will it stop the intimidation of citizens through constant surveillance?

In 1931, the frail saint of Sabarmati Ashram had taken out a march from Ahmedabad to Dandi, in an act of quiet defiance that made the world take notice of the Congress as a force to reckon with. For several years after, the Congress went from strength to strength, attracting the youth from across India to its idea of demanding <swaraj> through a non-violent struggle. These were precisely the years when fascism was in ascendancy in Europe. Hitler had come to power in 1933. For the youth in India, Germany's enmity with Britain could have turned them towards fascism. But that didn't happen, thanks to Gandhi's inspirational leadership. Nobody in India at the time, barring the RSS, was drawn to Hitler's fascism as a possible option. Not even when differences arose, say between Ambedkar and Gandhi. Nor even for Subhash Chandra Bose, who had very different ideas from Gandhi about ways of securing independence, but there was no racial prejudice in his world view—Muslims, Hindus, Christians stood shoulder to shoulder in his Azad Hind Fauj, as indeed did men and women. Their differences notwithstanding, there was an unspoken consensus among India's great leaders that a better future for the Indian people could only lie on the path of democracy.

In 1921, nearly a decade before the Dandi march, the Congress was just emerging from a bitter factional fight between its moderates and extremists. A generation of leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal had faded out. In 1920, Gandhi had been on a whirlwind tour of India, to get to know people, to connect with them and to bring them into the Congress fold. In 1921, he was given control of the party. To see the 1942 Quit India/ *Bharat Chhodo* movement in its historical context, it is important to study the trajectory of the Congress from 1920 to 1942 through 1931.

That context has a close resemblance with the context in which the Bharat Jodo movement has sprung up. In 2002, the Congress looked far away from being able to counter the 'India Shining' rhetoric of the NDA government. A decade later, in 2012, a Congress-led UPA government managed to usher in landmark pieces of legislation on the Right to Education and the Right to Information besides creating an excellent livelihood support programme through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act better known as MGNREGA. But again, over the past eight years, India has undergone a complete transformation. We have a government that cosies up to a few super-rich business families and has systematically emasculated all counterbalancing democratic institutions meant to restrain a runaway Executive.

Mainstream media has been turned into a government lapdog and the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression exists as if only to remind us of its real-life absence. Central investigative agencies like the Enforcement Directorate have been weaponised with laws that give them unbridled powers to search, seize, arrest and spread fear. The sharp rise in hate speech and hate crimes directed against minorities since 2014 has no parallel in India's history since 1947.

Outside India, war clouds are thickening and the community of nations seems ill-equipped to effectively check aggressive intent and wars. The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the popular uprising in Sri Lanka, the escalation of tension between India and its neighbours and the sharp rise in unemployment and poverty are all factors that bring back memories of Hitler's rise to power. The BJP's unceasing propaganda war and its ritual invocation of a fake militant nationalism also remind us of those times. The divisions in the opposition camp and the factionalism within opposition parties also make 2022 uncannily similar to conditions in 1942.

The similarities may not be obvious, though; they will become clearer when we review 2022 from a vantage point in future, when history reassesses the long march of 2022—the Bharat Jodo Yatra. In 1942, almost immediately after Gandhi raised his 'do or die' slogan, he was arrested and taken to prison with Kasturba and Mahadev Desai, both of whom died in prison. The Indian National Congress and three of its regional committees were banned; a hundred thousand went to jail and nearly as many went underground to continue the agitation. Five years later, India had gained independence. In the same time interval, the fascist regimes in Italy and Germany also crumbled. By 1947, Mussolini and Hitler, who commanded the world's most powerful armed forces in 1942, had become names uttered only in contempt. In 1942, colonialism was at the zenith of its exploitative might; by 1947, European colonialism had begun to look like a relic of the medieval dark ages.

Not everyone was convinced of Gandhi's method of resistance even in 1942, even after he had demonstrated what was possible over the previous decades. How can you fight the military might of the colonial power and fascists with non-violence and non-cooperation, his critics would ask. Similar doubts are being expressed today about the Bharat Jodo Yatra. How will this long march combat the strong-arm politics of the adversary? How will it stop the intimidation of citizens through constant surveillance?



Bharat Jodo Yatra (PTI Photo).

Weeks from now, the Yatra will be over, and it certainly won't get its due from our media. But those who participate in it, those who endorse it, those who speak to anyone who took part in it will speak of politics and public life in a new voice. A new climate of opinion will hopefully have been created, a new interest in keeping democracy and India's federal structure and diversity alive. I have no hesitation in saying that the Yatra has opened a new page in India's political life, a page that might set the agenda for an unfinished freedom struggle, to set our people free in ways we have dreamt of but not yet realised.

How will it uproot fear, falsehood, propaganda? I'd written earlier in these pages that the similarities between Gandhi's *Bharat Chhodo* agitation and the current Bharat Jodo Yatra go far beyond their surface-level attributes. Perhaps the most important feature they share is the realisation that the push for freedom must come from the people, which, in turn, must necessarily involve their awakening. Implicit in Rahul's embrace of the Gandhian method is the conviction that *<his>* battle against the prevailing economic disparities, the communal divide, the collapse of democratic institutions is their battle. It is a method designed to make people fearless and weaken the hold of the State over the minds of people. It is the method that taught people the strength of self-regulation or *swaraj*. It worked then, and beyond all expectations. Why won't it work now?

The Bharat Jodo Yatra is showing signs that people might be slowly emerging from their coma-like stupor. Media has tried its utmost to play it down, but thousands and thousands are joining it voluntarily every day. When this long march began on September 7, most predictions were unfavourable, even in circles that do not subscribe to the Sangh/ BJP ideology. But with the Yatra now close to completing the first half of its 3,570 km pilgrimage, the picture has changed completely. The Yatra has gathered great moral capital. People have begun to see that Rahul Gandhi is not what the BJP's propaganda machinery has sought to make of him. He comes across as a humane, determined, perceptive leader of people, full of care for everyone. A child can climb on to his shoulders and feel comfortable there; an old woman can hold his hand and walk with him in dignity, young girls can get close to him and feel the affection of an elder brother. He has acquired through this entirely public spectacle an image that no amount of propaganda can bring to anyone else. Whether the media and the etherised followers of the right-wing ideology admit it or not, Rahul Gandhi has the most magnetic presence in India's public sphere today.

The moral capital of the Yatra is deepened by its aesthetics—its atmosphere of caring and togetherness and the utter lack of mistrust and communal hatred that has become the default setting of our public life. The swarms joining the Yatra consist of students, farmers, labourers, who are no doubt putting aside everyday commitments and concerns to be a part of it. OBCs (other backward communities) are possibly the most numerous. There are civil society activists, initially wary of associating with the Congress; there are writers, artists, singers, film-makers, all participating with an exuberance that is uplifting, to say the least.

The Yatra has generated social capital too: the most significant impact is seen among the Congress party workers, its *karyakartas*. For years, they had been clamouring for opportunities to interact with the national leadership. They have got it now and their morale is up, their body language positive. All of this has no doubt created some political capital as well, and the buoyancy you witness in the Yatra seems to augur a seismic political reordering in days to come.

Rahul Gandhi has been candid and convincingly articulate through the Yatra. He has laboured the point that the Yatra has nothing to do with the upcoming state elections; he has repeatedly described it as a '*tapasya*', a pilgrimage of discovery and introspection. He has also described it as a journey to discover India, to know his country intimately. His fellow Yatris are also not talking tactical politics but instead of taking politics to a higher plane. They are trying to reset the political vocabulary, to craft a new political idiom, to find a political language that is not marooned in communalism and innuendo, or in divisive rhetoric that keeps invoking the Partition of India and the birth of Pakistan.

Weeks from now, the Yatra will be over, and it certainly won't get its due from our media. But those who participate in it, those who endorse it, those who speak to anyone who took part in it will speak of politics and public life in a new voice. A new climate of opinion will hopefully have been created, a new interest in keeping democracy and India's federal structure and diversity alive. I have no hesitation in saying that the Yatra has opened a new page in India's political life, a page that might set the agenda for an unfinished freedom struggle, to set our people free in ways we have dreamt of but not yet realised.



Mark Ulyseas has served time in advertising as copywriter and creative director selling people things they didn't need, a ghost writer for some years, columnist of a newspaper, a freelance journalist and photo-grapher. In 2009 he created *Live Encounters Magazine*, in Bali, Indonesia. It is a not for profit (adfree) free online magazine featuring leading academics, writers, poets, activists of all hues etc. from around the world. March 2016 saw the launch of its sister publication *Live Encounters Poetry*, which was relaunched as *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* in March 2017. In February 2019 the third publication was launched, *LE Children Poetry & Writing* (now renamed *Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers*). In August 2020 the fourth publication, *Live Encounters Books*, was launched. He has edited, designed and produced all of *Live Encounters'* 259 publications (till November 2022). Mark's philosophy is that knowledge must be free and shared freely to empower all towards enlightenment. He is the author of three books: *RAINY - My friend & Philosopher*; *Seductive Avatars of Maya - Anthology of Dystopian Lives* and *In Gethsemane: Transcripts of a Journey*.

<https://liveencounters.net/mark-ulyseas-publisher-editor-of-live-encounters-magazines/>  
<https://www.amazon.com/Mark-Ulyseas/e/B01FUUQVBG>



## MARK ULYSEAS

2022

### ANOTHER YEAR OF LIVING FOOLISHLY?

*This essay was written and published in 2008. Since then I have updated it every year. It is a reminder to us that the inhumanity of humanity has not changed. In fact, it appears to be growing in intensity.*

This year is grinding to a close, so what will it be in 2023?

More wars for religious or commercial purposes or perceived historical lands?

Cultural genocide... like the deconstruction of indigenous cultures for homogenisation by a godless State?

Child abuse?

Human slavery?

Theft of human organs?

Beheadings of teachers for expressing freedom of speech?

More public stabbings?

Another Mass Extinction in the making, perhaps humanity, by a bloody war raging on the border of Europe where talk is about using weapons of mass extermination?

Disembowelled frogs drying in the sun. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

More insidious revelations that expose the all-pervasive criminality of governments, international politics and sections of the Media?

Is the UN still a coffee shop for the rich and powerful to hang out and where honour still exists among thieves?

And are the medusa-like social media barons new lords of the manor? Do they control our hearts and minds and our freedom of speech? And is this the age of artificial intelligence?

And are the pharma and armaments companies increasing their profits as the body count keeps growing.

And is tourism fast becoming online voyeurism? Or, has the tourist flood gates opened to rampaging tourists?

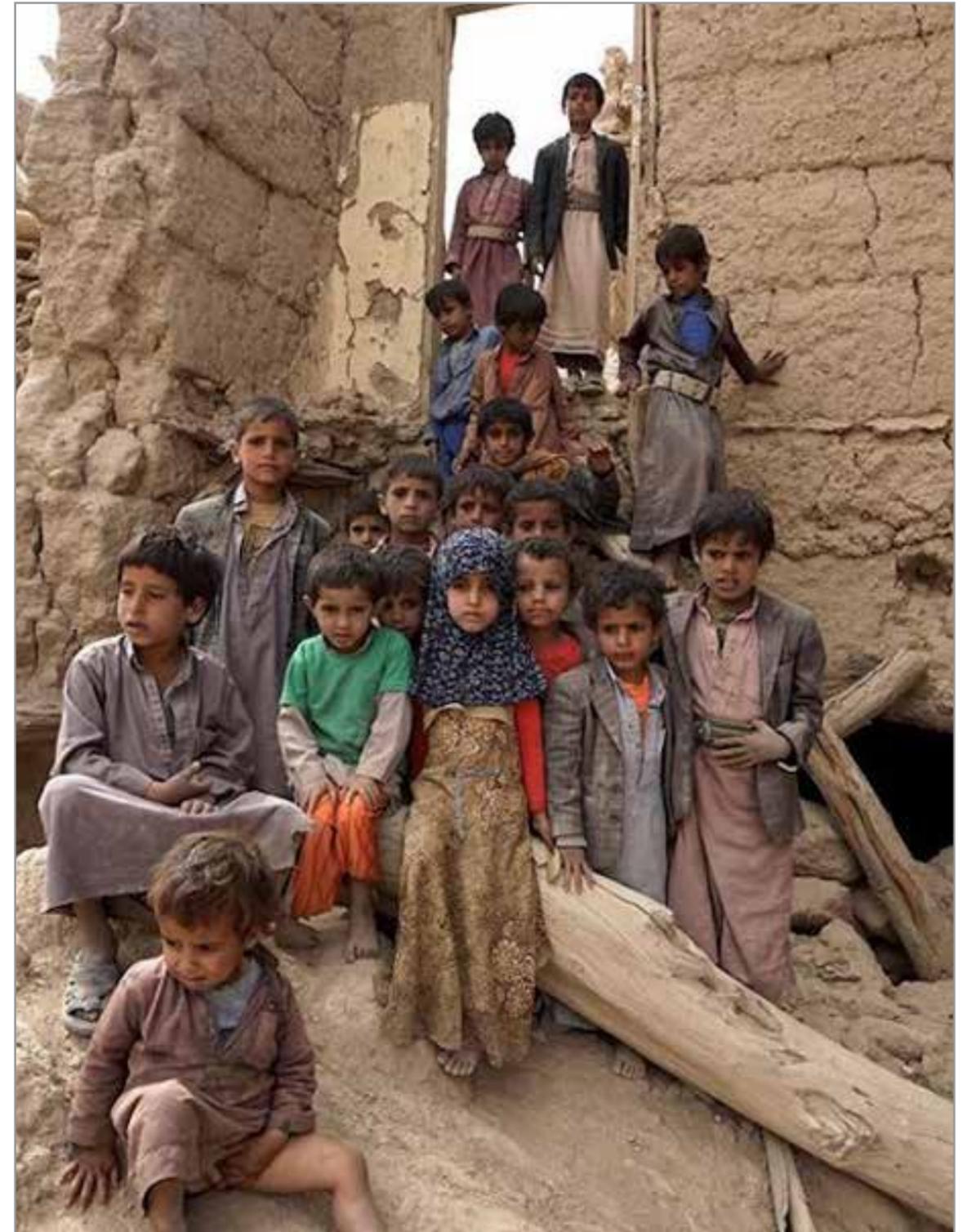
And is social media now the domain of roaming viral vitriolic mindsets looking for any cause?

And is woke liberalism the bastard offspring of fascism?

And has exceptionalism become a fundamental right?

There is so much to choose from. It's like a supermarket out there with all kinds of man-made disasters available on the shelves, one has simply to reach out and grab one. 2022 is ending on a note of negotiated delusions with the Climate Change Conference. What happened to the good old days when we used a blanket instead of a heater? All this talk of saving the world is pointless. Everything is done half-heartedly. Let's make a resolution for the New Year to decimate the planet. Destroy all our natural resources, pollute the rivers and farm the seas to extinction. At least we would be doing one thing properly.

On one hand we talk of peace, love and no war. On the other hand, we bomb, rape, pillage, annex and subdue nations with money, military power and retarded religiosity.



Yemeni children in rubble of destroyed building (UNOCHA/Giles Clark).  
<https://theirworld.org/news/yemen-youth-ambassador-teacher-on-life-for-school-children-in-conflict/>

After a two-decade war the invaders have left the country in the hands of the great unwashed. Afghan women and children are now at the mercy of these pathological misogynistic aberrations of humanity. Will the ordinary Afghan civilians ever get to live in peace?



For instance, let's take a quick look at Afghanistan. The British couldn't control the tribes in the 19th century, the Russians failed miserably and the Americans with their assorted comrades in arms, poor souls, were being killed along with thousands of faceless unarmed Afghan civilians. I suppose life is cheaper by the dozen. After a two-decade war the invaders have left the country in the hands of the great unwashed. Afghan women and children are now at the mercy of these pathological misogynistic aberrations of humanity. Will the ordinary Afghan civilians ever get to live in peace?

And what about that European country presently being devastated by a war that has been created and funded by those countries whose mantra is 'rules based international order'. Has it become the testing ground for newly developed killing machines? And when the killings subside will groups of loving hands at home descend on the land to make money from donations in the name of one fraud or another?

What about certain parts of the Middle East, areas that have become mass open-air abattoirs for the mindless slaughter of innocent people? Do you think they will run out of people considering the number of killings that are taking place? Education there is history – like the death of a Christian journalist killed by a bullet deliberately fired at close range. It stems from the barrel of a gun. The pen is for signing death certificates.

Statistics are essential in war zones. They can always be rearranged to suit one's perceived objectives. The little numbers represent people; mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, relatives and friends. A neat way to manage these numbers is to write in pencil so that an eraser can be used judiciously. And as the death toll in war ravaged countries rises, a hysterical caucus threatens a host of other countries for deviating from the 'acceptable norms of international behaviour like illegally invading countries on trumped up charges and bombing innocent folk back to the stone age...like former colonial masters in their death throes.

And are these the same countries that accuse China of ruthlessly dismantling the vibrant ancient Uighur culture, brainwashing and incarcerating the Uighurs in re-education camps whilst the Islamic countries appear deaf, blind and dumb to the slaughter of their fellow brethren?

And is Tibet now lost forever in the dragon's jaws? And will Taiwan follow suit in 2023?

Wazir Nazari, a member of Afghanistan's Shiite Hazara minority, was shot in the face by Taliban assailants, her father said. Photo courtesy: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghans-tell-of-executions-forced-marriages-in-taliban-held-areas-11628780820>

However, will the planned dumping of radioactive waste into the ocean by Japan be its main contribution to preserving the environment in 2023?

This dragon, which had unleashed a terrible virus (a natural phenomenon?) on the world, killing millions, shutting down tourism and all but destroying economies, has quickly recovered from the scourge and is now selling merchandise in the millions across the world. Is this the soul of Profit & Loss - where people continue to get poorer while the rich get richer?

And has this virus given governments across the world another reason to muzzle inconvenient citizens and to seek more measures to control them?

And is the much peddled term of democracy actually the mask of plutocracy, where the rich get to be elected and poor are fed promises?

Africa, the Dark Continent, what can one say about its peoples and their ancient civilizations that have slowly been corrupted by large corporations and foreign governments meddling in the affairs of the states: Buying and selling governments on mammoth proportions? Oh, for the days of the Rwandan blood bath.

Everything is quiet now, no excitement and drama except for bloody popular uprisings, theft of natural resources and other inconsequential happenings like the sudden spread of highly infectious diseases and mass kidnapping of school children for forced marriage and conversion...and the continuing practice of female genital mutilation, which appears to be a thriving business across the world where doting parents in western countries take their little girls on 'vacation' cuts while their governments lecture Africans on the scourge of female genital mutilation.

What about the sub-continent, India? Do they still abort female fetuses or do they bury them alive, now? Burn women who don't bring enough dowry? Is rape intrinsic to the male mindset? Do they continue to decimate wildlife? Persevere in the destruction of the environment? And do millions still exist on the threshold of life and death? And is the arrogant Indian Middle Class growing to newer levels self-indulgence?

And is protection of the holy cow more important than feeding hundreds of millions of people living below the poverty line? And are politicians continuing to feed off the socio-economic-religious insecurities of its people? And are sections of its media turning into manic performing artists, deliberately taking sides in political dramas and creating news for ratings?

Forgive me... I missed that little country to the west of India, the homeland of terrorists and an illicit nuclear arsenal - Pakistan, an army that has a country. Poor chaps they've had such a tiresome year with the constant ebb and flow of political violence and religious fundamentalism peppered with suicide bombers that probably the common folk want to migrate to the West... can't really blame them. Their new government is its armed forces' ventriloquist doll. The common folks' only desire is to live in peace to pray, work and procreate. Meanwhile their government has switched debtors from the West to China that in turn has commercially colonised this country bleeding it by a thousand loans.

Now let's see who is left on the black board? Hmm...the indigenous people of the Amazon are still fighting a losing battle with the powers that be to stop the plunder of their home, the rain forest, the green lung of mother earth, which is on fire. South America appears to be lost in translation. We never seem to get a lot of news from there except for soccer, drug lords, plunder of the marine world and the continued exploitation of the poor and defenceless by rapacious governments sponsored by those from the North and elsewhere. It has become the battle ground of powerful countries that use the common folk as cannon fodder.

Let's leave all this violence for some tuna, shark fin, whale, and dolphin meat. The Japanese and an assortment of other 'civilised' countries, Norway in particular, are so considerate to the world at large. For countries that pride themselves on rejecting nuclear weapons they have a rather odd way of showing their respect for the environment. I am referring to the mass killing of whales, dolphins and other sea creatures on an industrial scale. Actually, you must admire their concern. Ever considered the fact that they maybe ridding the oceans of monsters that take up so much space and are a serious health hazard to humanity? However, will the planned dumping of radioactive waste into the ocean by Japan be its main contribution to preserving the environment in 2023?

I think Japan's neighbour China has the right approach. It has dispensed with the cumbersome concept of human rights and its implementation. In its place totalitarianism with a large dose of plutocracy has been suitably installed. It uses its economic power and loan shark activities to threaten countries that do not kowtow its line.

As 2022 downs its shutters the price of human body parts has gone up. Human trafficking, organ trafficking and harvesting around the world (transplant tourism), including the civilised nations, is now second only to drug peddling in revenue. Profiteers forecast a higher income in 2023, thanks to continuing war, growing poverty, disease and transmigration of people (illegal migrants?).

There are many countries that lecture China on its human rights. Wonder who has a perfect track record...The world's last self-proclaimed superpower? A superpower that continues to interfere in the affairs of other nations by supplying state of the art weapons that are often used against civilians living a hand to mouth existence. I suppose the term 'collateral damage' is more palatable than the term... murder. There is a killing to be made on the sale of armaments but little or no desire to urgently help its own people devastated by natural disasters like massive fires and super storms and joblessness and crumbling infrastructure.

Civil liberties are essential for the survival of a nation and so is the health of its people. In some areas of society where common sense has been the victim, Nature has found a way of retaliating with diseases like Ebola, AIDS, Swine Flu and Zika, infecting millions and helping to keep the population in check: Of course, with a little assistance from humankind's scientific community who often test drugs on unsuspecting illiterate folk and other living beings, in the holy name of finding new cures, while making a profit.

But Nature has a conscience. It has distanced itself from the prevailing pestilence, COVID-19... a deadly virus that originated from the den of the dragon...a Biblical-like plague not from God, but from the godless. A virus that has receded into the realms of laboratories after killing millions and making huge profits for pharma companies.

Meanwhile, humanity is susceptible to dangerous new strains of super bacteria resistant to antibiotics.

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And once again, as we have done in the past, this Christmas and New Year we shall all sit down to sumptuous meals, drink whatever fancies our taste buds, shop till we drop and pamper our overweight children and pets. It's the season of happiness, love and family especially for the homeless, injured and maimed children of wars, missing people in Ukraine, Russia, Afghanistan, Syria, Xinjiang (Uighur), Tibet, Yemen, Hong Kong and elsewhere, asylum seekers, political detainees and the fringe folk of the planet. They will surely be very happy and content with what they see, hear, feel and touch this festive season.

From genocide to environmental disasters to a devastating infectious virus it has been a roller coaster ride through many countries and peoples and cultures and religions. This journey will end only when we truly comprehend the reason as to why we have been put on this planet by a power far greater than we can ever imagine.

Merry Christmas and a peaceful New Year to you.

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om



Mother and child, Laos. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

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